

**LEADERSHIP LEARNING THROUGH
CHALLENGING SITUATIONS:
PRIMARY SCHOOL HEADTEACHERS**

by

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ABSTRACT

This study offers an understanding of the leadership learning of headteachers through an exploration of their practices and perspectives when dealing with challenging situations. The research methodology uses semi-structured interviews to capture the experiences of eighteen primary school headteachers as they describe the challenges they face and the way in which they learn from them. The findings show that primary school leadership is embedded in relationships which are complex and challenging. The strategies and coping mechanisms headteachers use to deal with challenges are similar and reflect the powerful influence of values, trust and emotional resilience.

The insights presented in this study should inform the future research agenda in educational leadership and identify inadequacies in the leadership development of school leaders. Strategies which enable headteachers to experience more planned and meaningful development are presented. These include formal coaching systems, the formation of meaningful networks and guided critical reflection on experiences. A framework for integrated leadership development, which supports the aspects of leadership acquired through real-life challenges, is also proposed. This should enhance those aspects of leadership which can be learnt through challenging situations and better equip headteachers to manage and lead their schools.

DEDICATION

To my mother

DELIA SAMMON

for believing in me and teaching me the value of hard work.

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My deepest gratitude and affection go to my husband for his continued support and encouragement throughout the four years of this research. Without his kindness and patience I would not have been able to complete this thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BERA	British Educational Research Association
DfE	Department of Education
ERA	Educational Reform Act 1998
NCSL	National College for School Leadership
NPQH	National Professional Qualification for Headteachers
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
PwC	PricewaterhouseCoopers

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The subject of leadership within the primary education sector has been written about extensively in the past thirty years with recent literature focusing on the challenges headteachers face in managing and leading schools (Fullan, 2001; Bottery, 2004; Duignan, 2006). Despite the plethora of research in this area the picture of primary school leadership remains a very complex one, similar to that reflected in Hall and Southworth's 'state of the art' headship review in 1997, which concluded that 'it is still not known how headteachers influence and shape their schools' (Hall and Southworth, 1997:165). Research literature after the 1998 Educational Reform Act (ERA) focused strongly on the role of headteachers in managing their schools. The emphasis from the ERA was on the need for schools to achieve externally driven objectives. More recent studies and research has resulted in a greater focus on various models of leadership and the characteristics of leaders (PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), 2007) as well as the influence of leadership on pupil learning (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins, 2006). Knowing the characteristics of effective leaders and their impact on pupil achievement is a useful starting point but we also need to understand how leaders learn to lead. The intent of this thesis is to develop an understanding of the leadership learning of primary school headteachers through the challenging situations they experience.

In this introduction, the study is first placed in context, providing a justification for the research. The aim of the study is then given as well as clarification of the terminology to be used. The research questions are presented next, followed by an overview of the literature

discussed. An outline of the research design deployed is then provided. The chapter finishes with a brief overview of the structure of this thesis.

The context of the research

The past thirty years has seen a sustained interest and research into the development of effective leadership within education, and the relationship between good leadership and successful schools is now well established (Leithwood and Riehl, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2006; PwC, 2007; West-Burnham, 2009). The importance of leaders in driving school improvement and implementing education reform has been high on the government agenda for some time and the development of effective leadership has been a prime aim in educational reform. The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) was established in 2000 in recognition of the importance of developing and strengthening the roles of leaders in schools. Their ambitious brief was:

to ensure that our current and future school leaders develop the skills, the capability and the capacity to lead and transform the school education system into the best in the world (NCSL, 2001:9).

The National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH) was introduced to improve headteachers' skills and standardise the quality of headteachers. One of the fundamental messages emanating from the NCSL was that if institutions were to have effective leaders and leadership development, it would be necessary to address effective ways in which leaders learn to lead.

Since 1990 the role of primary school headteachers has attracted considerable attention from the research community in England (Ribbins and Marland, 1994; Hall and Southworth, 1997; Fidler and Atton, 2004; Day, Leithwood and Sammons, 2008). Whilst there has been a

sustained interest in and research into primary headship, the research remains relatively limited in scale and scope. Educational studies broadly acknowledge that headteachers are pivotal to the success of their schools; however, a clear understanding of how headteachers learn leadership is still lacking in educational research.

This thesis seeks to describe the challenges faced by primary school headteachers and to examine the strategies and coping mechanisms they use when dealing with challenging situations. The main purpose and justification for this study, however, is to contribute towards an understanding of how leaders learn to lead from dealing with challenging situations. There are two reasons why this is important. One has to do with preparing leaders for the challenges they undertake and the other concerns the need to foster leadership learning schools. First, if challenging experiences play a pivotal role in shaping leadership, as recent research suggests (Bottery, 2004; Maslin-Ostrowski, 2007; Glatter, 2008), this must provide a powerful argument for determining how leadership training and development programmes are constructed. The more we understand about the learning of headteachers when they undertake challenges, the better we can prepare them for those tasks. A framework of the factors which influence headteachers' leadership learning could therefore be proposed for the leaders in this study. This study could also serve to alert aspiring headteachers to the complexity of the role and promote an understanding of how to achieve and sustain leadership success for both new and experienced headteachers. Second, if we can understand the learning of leaders, we can help leaders foster learning throughout their schools. In an age when challenge is constant, learning becomes increasingly important as a fundamental skill for a leader's success and survival. The more that leaders understand about their own learning, the more able they will be to foster learning throughout their school.

Aim of the study

Two basic assumptions underpin this study: first, that headteachers learn as a result of the work they undertake; second, that the process of learning is inevitable and there is a likelihood that their learning is increased by virtue of the nature of the challenges they face. Therefore, the headteachers will be more likely to learn because of the difficulties or problems that must be overcome. The aim of this study, therefore, is to provide an insight into the influential experiences of headteachers and the effect they have on leadership learning.

Terminology

It is a small, but important, point that if the readers of this study are to understand the principles, underlying theory and conclusions of the research, they must be able to comprehend the terminology used. It is necessary, therefore, to explain this, carefully distinguishing between terms that may appear similar, but here have distinct connotations. Some of these distinctions are simple, while others are more subtle and need greater explanation. Learning can mean many things to different people and this section will discuss and delineate definitions of learning that apply to this study. For this study, the following definitions apply:

- **Learning:** The way in which individuals assimilate, make sense of, organise and adapt information, skills, attitudes, values, perspectives and knowledge.
- **Experiential learning:** The learning that is gained through experiences occurring during the ordinary business of life. It is typically non-routine, informal and occurs in the natural setting of work. It may be conscious and organised or tacit and unorganised.
- **Formal Learning:** Organised and structured learning which has a learning objective. From the learner's standpoint it is always intentional.
- **Incidental learning:** The aspect of experiential learning that is tacit and unconscious. It occurs when individuals are not aware of what they learn, do not reflect on their experience and cannot describe their learning.

- **Accidental learning:** Unanticipated and opportunistic learning which occurs when individuals learn something they did not expect. Typically, something happens that triggers the individual to reflect and the reflection leads to learning.

Adapted from Marsick and Watkins (1992:7)

Key research questions

The consideration of the aim of the study leads to the four research questions that need to be addressed. The first research question: *What are the challenging situations faced by headteachers?* is necessary in order to place the study in context. This needs to be considered since headteachers' perceptions of the challenges they face will determine their responses to them and subsequent learning from them.

Second: *What determines the strategies headteachers use to deal with challenging situations?*

A number of strategies may be used by headteachers to deal with challenging situations. These are explored to identify the influences headteachers use to determine their actions when dealing with challenges.

Third: *Which coping mechanisms do headteachers exhibit when dealing with challenging situations?* Some headteachers are able to withstand challenging situations and some are not. This research question explores the behaviours and mechanisms exhibited by headteachers that enable them to cope with challenging situations.

Finally, the fourth research question: *What are the effects of challenging situations on the leadership learning of headteachers?* This question has been formulated to establish how leaders learn from challenging experiences and should provide an understanding of how these experiences impact on how they lead.

Investigating these questions is based on the argument that few studies of headship have sought to understand the effect of challenging situations on headteachers (Bottery, 2004; Duignan, 2006; Mander, 2008). This study presents a view that challenges experienced by headteachers provide an opportunity for them to learn leadership. In this way it also seeks to establish a relationship between challenging situations and leadership learning.

The personal and professional values that I bring to this research are largely responsible for identifying the theme of my enquiry in the first place. I was a headteacher for twelve years and now hold the position of Senior Adviser in a large London local authority. My current role involves the support, development and training of leaders in the local authority and I am keen to strengthen my skills in this area and improve my understanding of school leadership. This study grows out of the opportunity to reflect upon challenging leadership issues in headship and the impact they have upon primary school headteachers.

An overview of the literature

The literature on leadership within primary education in the past thirty years has tended to focus on two main areas: the analysis of the role and changing role of the leaders and the types and styles of leadership. Ribbins and Gunter (2002) claim two important areas of leadership research are under-represented. First, studies of leading: ‘what individual leaders do and why they do it in a variety of specific circumstances, how and why others respond as they do, and with what outcomes’ (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002:362). Second, Ribbins and Gunter call for more studies of leaders exploring what leaders are, by whom they are shaped and how they grow as leaders (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002:166).

Whilst it is relatively well documented as to what leaders do, we know less about how and why they do it and what helps to form them as leaders. It is therefore necessary to draw upon the wider field of leadership research within and beyond education, to develop a greater understanding in these areas. Literature on the general field of leadership in education will be used. In particular, the work of Webb and Vulliamy (1996), Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999), Fullan (2001, 2002) and Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Harris, Leithwood, Quing and Brown (2010) is significant in enabling an overview of the field of leadership in education. Defining the concept of 'leadership' in education is difficult as there are numerous competing theories about what leadership actually means. Reviewing the literature surrounding leadership will be useful in order to place the concept of leadership into context. Reviewing the broad literature on school leadership, Bush and Glover (2003:7) proposed the following definition:

Leadership is a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. Successful leaders develop a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values. They articulate this vision at every opportunity and influence their staff and other stakeholders to share the vision. The philosophy, structures and activities of the school are geared towards the achievement of this shared vision.

This is a useful starting point in understanding how school leadership is conceptualised in England and draws together the focus on influence, values and vision that school leaders need to bring to the task. Southworth (1999) examines the relationship between school leadership theorising, practice and policy-making in England and argues that:

headship has become more demanding ... there has been an intensification of work and expectations ... accountabilities have sharpened (1999:60).

The emergence of ‘transformational’ leadership, seen by some as the ‘new paradigm of leadership’ (Gronn, 1999; Southworth, 1999; Harris, 2003) focused on the multifaceted nature of headship:

constantly and consistently managing several competing tensions and dilemmas, and, secondly, effective leaders are, above all, people-centred (Harris, 2003:19).

Whilst definitions of transformational leadership may vary, they are similar in that they all are concerned with the transformation of the organisation through developing relationships with the people associated with the organisation. Numerous other avenues in educational leadership have been explored, including the follower’s influence on the leader and the dispersal of leadership to those who have most influence on various important aspects of education – termed ‘shared leadership’ (Gronn, 2002; Gold, Evans, Earley, Halpin and Collarbone, 2003; Harris, 2003). Academics such as Fullan (2001), West-Burnham (2002), Glatter (2004) and Crawford (2009) explore the implications of transformational leadership in schools whereby relationships are built and fostered across the school. They offer insights and discuss the complexities of managing the people in the organisation. Along with Bryk and Schnieder (2002) and Tschannen-Moran (2004), these authors also elaborate on the benefits of building trust in organisations and outline inhibitors to successful relationships in schools.

Research related to challenging situations in school leadership is explored in this study. Mander (2008) suggests that the way in which challenges are perceived and the significance of the challenge determines the response of the headteacher. This, he says, helps shape the way leaders lead and helps them define their leadership philosophy. There are strong echoes here of Gronn’s (1999) assertion that significant and relevant events in leaders’ life histories

and the value systems from which they draw, should be seen as key filters through which their particular skills are honed.

Leaders use a range of strategies and coping mechanisms to help them deal with challenging situations. Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) have played a significant part in determining how leaders solve problems and meet challenges, some of which are outside their preferred ways of working and others for which the knowledge already exists. This distinction by Leithwood and Steinbach has resonance for school leaders. Put simply, it suggests that resolving some problems is a management issue; tackling other challenges requires leadership. The influence of values in determining the strategies leaders use when faced with challenge is explored in depth throughout this study. The concept of emotional resilience and how this intersects with the other factors that influence one's capacity to cope with challenging situations is also explored in detail (Bottery, 2007; Beatty, 2008; Crawford, 2007, 2009).

Vaill (1996) and Glatter (2009) argue that learning becomes a fundamental skill when schools are faced with continual pressures. They say that leaders need to learn better, and leaders need to learn how to encourage the learning of others. One aspect of learning that therefore needs to be understood more fully is the learning of leaders. Many academics have written about how adults learn from experience. Kolb (1984), Glatter (1996) and Day (2003) all describe the process by which adults reap lessons from experience. Whilst the studies are not identical, there are important similarities in the findings. In all three studies the processes of adult learning they describe are cyclical and incorporate reflection as a key element in the processes. Whilst there is a plethora of literature on adult learning, the literature pertaining to the way in which leaders learn as a result of dealing with challenging situations is limited and

the connection between dealing with challenges and learning from challenge is not clearly understood. The intended outcome of this exploration is an identification of factors and processes to understand the phenomenon better.

The literature on career history as a means of identifying the journey to leadership is important to consider in this study in that it argues that leaders develop their values over periods of time and that experiences influence how leaders learn to lead. Both Day and Bakioglu (1996) and Gronn (1999) identify four stages within which leaders progress through their career. Day and Bakioglu (1996) suggest the four phases of ‘initiation’, ‘development’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘disenchantment’. Gronn (1999) outlines a common pattern for headteachers who appear to progress through the ‘Formation’ stage (infancy to adulthood), then ‘Accession’ (preparation for higher roles), ‘Incumbency’ (headship) and finally ‘Divestiture’ as retirement approaches. This study focuses primarily on Gronn’s incumbency phase of headship.

As the previous sections demonstrate, the study of educational leadership over the past thirty years has developed along several, sometimes competing and contradictory, lines. Chapter Two seeks first to explore lessons learnt about leadership in general and then, more specifically, about the challenges of headship and their resultant impact on leadership learning.

Research design

The empirical part of this work is a qualitative research study that draws on the perceptions of eighteen primary school headteachers. The methodological approach chosen is survey and the

method for gathering data is through in-depth interviews. In using this strategy I attempted, through direct engagement with the headteachers, to capture their perceptions and understandings ‘from the inside’ so as to better understand how they make sense of and manage their daily activities (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Qualitative data becomes such by the process of interpretation. Implicit in qualitative research, therefore, is the significant role of the researcher in the production and interpretation of qualitative data. Briggs and Coleman (2007:24) outline the implications of taking an interpretive approach to educational research:

First, interpretive researchers recognise that they are part of, rather than separate from, the research topics they investigate. Secondly ... the core task is to explore meanings of events and phenomena from the subjects’ perspectives. Thirdly, a related issue for educational researchers is the extent to which the researchers’ accounts represent or distort what research participants have said or written.

As the aim of this research is to describe leaders’ challenging experiences directly and to provide illumination as to how they learn to lead, the research approach can be said to be broadly phenomenological in nature. My epistemological approach is interpretive in that I will try to explore and understand the social reality of the headteachers through their explanations and interpretations.

The survey approach using semi-structured interviews is distinctive from other methodological approaches because it allows:

a combination of a commitment to a breadth of study, a focus on the snapshot at a given point in time and a dependence on empirical data (Denscombe, 2003:7).

The research interview is described as an opportunity for participants to ‘discuss their interpretations of the world around them and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000:267). One advantage of conducting semi-structured interviews is that it allowed for greater depth than is the case with other methods of data collection. However, there have been frequent critics of this approach, largely surrounding the issues of validity and reliability. As qualitative research tends to be based on the intensive study of a relatively small number of cases, it raises the question about how representative those cases are and how likely it is that what was found in those few cases will be found elsewhere in similar cases. However, Gronn (1999) and Ribbins (2003) argue that this methodology provides a richness of data that enables the development of a valid knowledge base, which could inform the development of educational leadership.

Briggs and Coleman (2007) point out that, when using interviews, the role and close distance between the researcher and the participants have implications for bias within a study. The use of semi-structured interviews inevitably created a closer relationship than the methods employed by a quantitative study. Many of the headteachers interviewed are known to me through my work as a Senior Adviser for the local authority and there was a need to ensure objectivity as much as was possible.

Reporting the findings

In addition to the findings being presented in this doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham, a short executive summary of the main findings will be disseminated to research contributors and senior education personnel of the London authority involved in the

research. A report of the findings will also be prepared for publication, along with further papers generated by the data gathered in the project.

Structure of the thesis

Chapter One is offered as an introduction to the research. The thesis is then arranged in the following chapters: Chapter Two: Literature Review; Chapter Three: Research Design; Chapter Four: Presentation of Findings; Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings; Chapter Six: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations. Additional documentation and information are included in Appendices to the thesis.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The generic literature on leadership is both expansive and diverse. In this chapter I propose to select a number of major studies that have contributed to an understanding of leadership challenges and leadership learning. In the first section of this chapter the research is put into context by providing a review of studies of leadership theory. I will then outline a number of relevant studies particularly related to educational leadership and management. The second section identifies the central challenges experienced by headteachers whilst the third section explores the literature related to the strategies and coping mechanisms headteachers use to deal with challenging situations. Consideration is also given to conceptual models of educational leadership careers and relevant studies on the challenges faced by those in early, middle and late headship. Finally, studies that have contributed to the understanding of leadership learning are explored with specific focus on leadership learning through challenging situations.

Practitioner publications in professional journals based on accounts of personal and professional experience will be used, as will academic research publications in refereed journals based on empirical data or scholarships. The majority of authors are located in the United Kingdom and Europe, but the review will also be drawn from writers in the United States of America and Australia to ensure diversity and balance. Transferability and bias will be considered when using reports from countries beyond the UK. Government reports and literature from relevant agencies will be reviewed, such as the Department of Education (DfE)

and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). Dissertations and theses from students working in the same field will also be used to support this research.

There is a wealth of research related to school leadership; this required decisions about the breadth of literature to consider in the review process. Five criteria governed the choice of literature selected for this assignment. These were (1) recency (i.e. references published mainly within the last 30 years); (2) credibility of authorship (i.e. references published by well-known national and international scholars in the field of leadership); (3) books/book chapters and journal articles only (web-based materials and searches, dissertation abstracts and conference papers were also explored); (4) availability of documentation; and (5) materials that focused on developments regarding designated leaders such as headship were favoured in selection. Key words surrounding the topic of leadership were put into journal and internet databases to identify the range of literature. I used the eJournals Directory at www.elibrary.bham.ac.uk extensively here. By doing this, key subject areas and authors were established. Work by these authors was then reviewed, and the references from these works provided further useful information about other relevant works. This led to a second trail of investigation and a narrowing down of relevant publications. I interrogated internet search engines, such as Google Scholar, to identify any pertinent articles that I may have missed through a 'key word' and 'key author' search within the leadership domain and reviewed the education online facility at www.leeds.ac.uk/educol for conference papers. I also reviewed appropriate websites: for example, the National College at www.ncsl.org.uk for specific information on recent activities within the field. The culmination of these activities allowed the identification of four key areas that would be useful to review as they were to underpin my research and provide conceptual frameworks upon which this thesis could be based. The four

areas of investigation are: the wider field of leadership and the nature of the leadership of headteachers; the challenging situations experienced by primary school headteachers; the strategies and coping mechanisms used by the headteachers when dealing with challenging situations; and the leadership learning experiences of headteachers when dealing with challenging situations. This review is on a thematic basis, rather than in chronological order, taking the key issues and themes one at a time.

Shifting conceptions of leadership

Throughout the twentieth century, leadership has been the focus of extensive study (Bryman, 1992; Kouzes and Posner, 1995; Bennis, 2003; Leithwood and Riehl, 2005) and there is a wealth of research that attempts to characterise effective leadership. Defining it in terms of influence, Leithwood and Riehl (2005) maintain that successful leadership works with others to foster a shared sense of purpose and direction. Similarly Kouzes and Posner (1995) characterise leadership as persuading, influencing and getting people to reach goals, claiming that effective leadership is contingent upon the followers' perception of leaders rather than the leaders' abilities.

A review of literature on leadership theories over the past thirty years reveals an evolving series of theories from the 'Great Man' and 'Trait' theories prevalent in the late 1980s, followed by style theory and situational theories, to the more recent emphasis on 'Transformational' and 'Transactional' leadership (Leithwood, 1992; Pearce and Conger, 2003; Bottery, 2004; Harris, 2008). Whilst many different leadership theories have emerged over time, most can be classified as one of the eight major types shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Overview of leadership theories.

Great Man Leadership Theories	Great Man theories assume that the capacity for leadership is inherent – that great leaders are born not made. The term ‘Great Man’ was used because, at the time, leadership was thought of primarily as a male quality, especially in terms of military leadership.
Trait Theories	Similar in some ways to ‘Great Man’ theories, trait theories assume that people inherit certain qualities and traits that make them better suited to leadership. Trait theories often identify particular personality or behavioural characteristics shared by leaders.
Contingency Theories	Contingency theories of leadership focus on particular variables related to the environment that might determine which particular style of leadership is best suited for the situation. According to this theory, no leadership style is best in all situations.
Situational Leadership	Situational theories propose that leaders choose the best course of action based upon situational variables. Different styles of leadership may be more appropriate for certain types of decision-making.
Behavioural Theories	Behavioural theories of leadership are based upon the belief that great leaders are made, not born. Rooted in behaviourism, this leadership theory focuses on the actions of leaders not on mental qualities or internal states.
Management Theories	Management theories (also known as ‘Transactional theories’) focus on the role of supervision, organisation and group performance. These theories base leadership on a system of rewards and punishments.
Transformational Theories	Transformational theories (also known as ‘Relationship theories’) focus upon the connections formed between leaders and followers. Transformational leaders motivate and inspire people by helping group members see the importance and higher good of the task. This style often has high ethical and moral standards.

Adapted from Van Wart (2003).

Whilst early theories tend to focus upon the characteristics and behaviours of successful leaders, later theories considered the role of followers and the contextual nature of leadership with a greater focus on the collective rather than the individual nature of leadership. This prompted a shift away from the generic characteristics and behaviours of the individual to a

recognition of the importance of responding to different situations and contexts and the leaders' role in relation to others. In the late 1990s the leadership world, particularly the business world, was dominated by literature that focused on transactional leadership:

If there was any message from leaders of such literature (which was largely written for the business world), it was that in an age of relative economic stability, the leaders job was a rational job, one of *Transactional leadership*. This suggested Day et al. (2000), is essentially a form of scientific managerialism, in which leaders exercise power and influence through controlling the rewards in an organization, rewards they can offer or withhold from the work force (Bottery, 2004:16).

This transactional model of leadership was designed specifically to deal with a stable and predictable economy where the use of power and the exchange of favours to motivate the workforce were prevalent.

At the turn of the twenty-first century when the Western economy started to experience change, challenge and instability, transactional leadership came to be viewed as insufficient for coping with the high levels of uncertainty experienced in the Western market place. What was now seen as an essential function of leadership was the need to generate commitment to change from a workforce by providing a vision for workers and tapping into the deeper levels of staff motivation such as their beliefs and cultures. The traditional and rational transactional leadership was soon replaced with the new, and socially driven, transformational leadership. This was cited in business literature as the only way to cope with unremitting change. Transformational leaders would create a vision; develop the trust of their followers; and build loyalty, self-confidence and self-regard. Writers at this time referred to leadership as something carried out by an individual, *with* or *for* others, towards a specific goal or outcome. Transformational leadership was consistently referred to as the most progressive of the

descriptions of leadership in that it aimed towards the deep transformation or emancipation of those led.

Such literature has increased the emphasis upon the links between leadership and the culture of the organisation and the theory that leaders have the potential to change the cultural context within which people work. This literature realigns the traditional leader–follower relationship to one where the relationship is based more for mutual benefit than power hierarchies. Transformational leaders were tasked with creating and espousing a vision. As a result of this, transformational leadership quickly became aligned with charismatic theories of leadership. This, however, did not sit well with some educational theorists of the day:

transformational theories may have too narrow a focus, in the process neglecting such issues as task orientated behaviour, the interaction of a leader with superiors, peers or outsiders, and of the influence and dynamics of leadership upon a group or an organization (Yukl, 1999:47).

Yukl argues that the transformational and charismatic theories of leadership were brought about as business and management tools to ensure that workers embrace the managerial and sometimes capitalist ‘values’ of an organisation, and he cautioned against borrowing models and theories and applying them randomly to educational practices.

Educational leadership and management have attracted a great deal of theoretical interest and debate and there appears to be no single definition that satisfies everyone. Dimmock (1999:442) provides one of the few distinctions amongst these concepts whilst also acknowledging that there are competing definitions:

School leaders [experience] tensions between competing elements of leadership, management and administration. Irrespective of how these terms are defined, school leaders experience difficulty in deciding the balance between higher order tasks designed to improve staff, student and school performance (leadership), routine maintenance of present operations (management) and lower order duties (administration).

Whilst there are numerous competing definitions of leadership and management there, is broad agreement that the term 'leadership' should be differentiated from the term management (Webb and Vulliamy, 1996; Leithwood et al., 1999; Daresh and Male, 2000; Day, Harris and Hadfield, 2001), although Fidler (1997:26) argues against a firm distinction between leadership and management, claiming that they have an 'intimate connection' and 'a great deal of overlap, particularly in respect of motivating people and giving a sense or purpose to the organisation'. The differentiation between leadership and management is discussed in this section and needs to be set in historical context here, particularly when considering the changing role of headteachers.

The focus on management over leadership was part of large-scale reform in the latter part of the twentieth century. The post-Educational Reform Act (1988) period saw the focus on externally driven outcomes and fulfilling government-imposed targets, which became the prevailing picture throughout the 1990s. Its accompanying emphases on more detailed government intervention and high stakes testing turned leadership into management that emphasised delivering the short-term policies and purposes of others (Bush, 1999; Day et al., 2001; Allix and Gronn, 2005; Adair, 2006). This narrow interpretation of headship prompted a number of critics to seek a greater leadership role for school headteachers in developing a vision and influencing school culture, not simply implementing externally driven aims and mandates. Webb and Vulliamy (1996) describe the tensions between, on the one hand, the

headteacher's management and administrative role and, on the other hand, their leadership role, particularly in relation to teaching and learning. They compare the expanding and diverse nature of headteachers' work, together with increasing pressures on them to be cost-effective, competitive and measurably efficient managers, to that of chief executives, rather than trying to run their organisations as operatives on the shop floor.

There was, however, a paradigm shift in the perception of educational leadership in 2000 with the opening of the National College of School Leadership (NCSL). The name of the college gave the clearest indication of leadership as a preferred term over management to describe the activities of school headteachers, college principals, leadership teams and middle managers. The college literature stated that its main aim was to 'provide a single national focus for school leadership development, research and innovation' (NCSL, 2001:9). This aim was backed by a lavish purpose-built centre and substantial funding. The advent of the NCSL fundamentally changed the landscape of leadership development in England and the College's leadership development programmes invariably emphasised leadership over management. Those who were managers in schools were now being asked to be leaders who could develop and inspire their teachers' commitment to and capacity for ensuring the best possible learning opportunities for their pupils. Governors were now tasked with appointing leaders rather than managers, leaders who had the skills qualities and qualifications to engage with a significant number of stakeholders in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for all children. This new agenda required a transformation in how school leaders delivered their school improvement plans, relying heavily on collaboration and multi-agency working. Educational leadership was, and continues to be, seen as an interactive, social process:

The attributes that this conception implies – ability to live with uncertainty and learn from mistakes, agility, adaptability, preparedness to distribute leadership, work across boundaries and build trusting relationships – are likely to become even more important in the future based on current contextual trends (Glatter, 2009:226).

Despite the current emphasis on educational leadership over educational management Glatter (1996) argues that it is vital that both dimensions of leadership and management are given equal prominence. He states that whilst a clear vision is essential to establish the nature and direction of change, it is equally important to ensure that innovations are implemented efficiently and that the school's residual functions are carried out effectively while certain elements are undergoing change:

Methods ... are as important as knowledge, understanding and value orientations. Erecting this kind of dichotomy between something pure called 'leadership' and something 'dirty' called 'management', or between values and purposes on the one hand and methods and skills on the other, would be disastrous (Glatter, 1996:189).

The vast and shifting array of literature on educational leadership outlined above is evidence that leading schools is a complex process, and the extent to which any one leadership theory or model can ever fully capture the nature of what makes some leaders or organisations successful and others unsuccessful remains the subject of continual discussion and debate.

A typology for leadership

Despite the concerns of Bryman (1992) and Yukl (1999), educational researchers and practitioners continue to place generic leadership theories into broad educational themes and types (Leithwood, 1992; Leithwood et al., 1999; Leithwood and Duke, 1999; Bush and Glover, 2003; PWC, 2007). The work of Leithwood et al. (1999) remains one of the most influential of all these studies in describing seven major educational leadership categories which continue to dominate contemporary discourse: (a) instructional, (b) transformational,

(c) moral, (d) participative, (e) managerial, (f) interpersonal, (g) contingent. 'Instructional' leadership focuses primarily on the behaviours of leaders that are immediately related to pupil achievement. Reiterating the importance of instructional leadership, Leithwood et al. (1999:8) assert that:

instructional leadership ... typically assumes that the critical attention by leaders is the behavior of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students.

Southworth (2002:78) says that 'instructional leadership is likely to be more effective when it is conceptualised as 'broad' rather than 'narrow' because it increases the scope for other leaders to play a role as well as the principal and because it recognises how social organisations operate. He adds (2002:79) that 'instructional leadership ... is strongly concerned with teaching and learning, including the professional learning of teachers as well as student growth'. This is in contrast to Leithwood's (1992:499) claims that 'instructional leadership images are not adequate' because they are 'heavily classroom focused'. Despite these comments, instructional leadership is currently regarded as important dimension of school leadership because it targets the school's central activities, teaching and learning. It may also be undergoing a renaissance in England, not least because of the importance placed on it in current Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspections.

Transformational leadership is readily applied to educational settings in this study and is seen as building a common interest among all stakeholders. Leithwood et al. (1999:9) provide a detailed definition of this model of leadership:

This form of leadership assumes that the central focus of leadership ought to be the commitments and capacities of organisational members. Higher levels of personal commitment to organisational goals and greater capacities for accomplishing those goals are assumed to result in extra effort and greater productivity.

Leithwood and Duke (1999) concur that the focus on transformational leadership is to attend to the capacities of the members of an organisation. Leithwood et al. (1999) claim that transformational leadership is the model that comes closest to providing a comprehensive approach to leadership, although they subsequently state that 'transformational leadership practices ought to be considered a necessary but not sufficient part of an effective leader's repertoire' (1999:21), referring also to issues of school context. Day et al.'s (2001:47) research suggests that successful principals are both transactional, 'ensuring that systems were maintained and met and that their schools ran smoothly', and transformative, 'building on esteem, competence, autonomy and achievement'.

Despite the seeming popularity of transformational leadership in current educational literature, the contemporary policy climate within which schools have to operate raises some questions about the validity of the transformational model. The English system increasingly requires school leaders to adhere to government prescriptions that affect aims, curriculum content and pedagogy, as well as values. There is 'a more centralised, more directed, and more controlled educational system [that] has dramatically reduced the possibility of realising a genuinely transformational education and leadership' (Bottery, 2004:215).

The third leadership category identified in Leithwood et al.'s (1999) seminal study is 'moral' leadership, which is described as the critical focus on values and ethics. Moral leadership assumes that the critical focus of leadership ought to be on the values and ethics of leaders themselves and their authority and influence are derived from conceptions of what is 'right' or 'good' (Leithwood et al., 1999:11).

Sergiovanni (2001:10) says that ‘excellent schools have central zones composed of values and beliefs that take on sacred or cultural characteristics’ and argues for both moral and managerial leadership. His conception points to the vital role of management, but also shows that moral leadership is required to develop a learning community:

In the principalship the challenge of leadership is to make peace with two competing imperatives, the managerial and the moral. The two imperatives are unavoidable and the neglect of either creates problems. Schools must be run effectively if they are to survive. But for the school to transform itself into an institution, a learning community must emerge ... [This] is the moral imperative that principals face (Sergiovanni, 2001:329).

The fourth leadership type provided by Leithwood et al. is ‘participative’ leadership, which stresses the importance of democratic decision-making in schools. ‘Participative leadership ... assumes that the decision-making processes of the group ought to be the central focus of the group’ (Leithwood et al., 1999:12). More recently called ‘shared leadership’, or ‘distributed leadership’ (Bush and Glover, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2006; Muijs, Harris, Lumby, Morrison and Sood, 2006; Rhodes and Brundrett, 2006; Harris, 2008), this model sets out three justifications for participative leadership: (a) participation increases school effectiveness; (b) participation is justified by democratic principles; and (c) in the context of school site based management, leadership is available to teachers and principals.

The fifth category of educational leadership described by Leithwood et al. (1999) is managerial. This leadership style focuses on the tasks, functions and behaviours of leaders, and advocates of this leadership type posit that if these functions are carried out competently, then the goals of the organisation are effectively met. The notion of ‘managerial leadership’ may appear to be a contradiction, particularly in the light of the distinctions outlined earlier in this study. Nevertheless, it merits separate consideration in this section because it is included

in the Leithwood et al. (1999) typology and because it serves to demonstrate that a narrow view of 'management' is often adopted. Leithwood et al.'s (1999:14) definition serves to illustrate this latter point:

Managerial leadership assumes that the focus of leaders ought to be on functions, tasks and behaviours and that if these functions are carried out competently the work of others in the organisation will be facilitated. Most approaches to managerial leadership also assume that the behaviour of organisational members is largely rational. Authority and influence are allocated to formal positions in proportion to the status of those positions in the organisational hierarchy.

Leithwood et al. describe their sixth leadership style – 'interpersonal' leadership – as that which focuses on the relationships leaders have with teachers, students and others connected with the school. Interpersonal leaders adopt a collaborative approach and may have advanced personal skills that enable them to operate effectively with internal and external stakeholders. West-Burnham (2002:1) argues that 'interpersonal intelligence is the vital medium. It is impossible to conceptualise any model of leadership that does not have interpersonal intelligence as a key component.' This seems to be somewhat overstated in that some of the leadership models previously reviewed do not appear to depend on this notion. West-Burnham links interpersonal leadership to moral leadership, stating that 'there is moral imperative on school leaders to adopt a model of personal effectiveness which exemplifies the values of the school'. This theme mirrors that of Fullan and Miles (1992), who state that the pressures which are evident in the work of school leaders suggests a requirement for high-level personal and interpersonal skills.

The final style identified by Leithwood et al. (1999) is that of contingent leadership, which pays attention to how leaders respond to their unique organisational circumstances or problems they encounter. The contingent model provides an alternative approach, recognising

the diverse nature of school contexts and the advantages of adapting leadership styles to the particular situation, rather than adopting a 'one size fits all' stance. Leithwood et al. (1999:15) offer a definition of this model:

This approach assumes that what is important is how leaders respond to the unique organisational circumstances or problems ... there are wide variations in the contexts for leadership and that, to be effective, these contexts require different leadership responses ... individuals providing leadership, typically those in formal positions of authority, are capable of mastering a large repertoire of leadership practices. Their influence will depend, in large measure, on such mastery.

Yukl (2002:234) adds that 'the managerial job is too complex and unpredictable to rely on a set of standardised responses to events. Effective leaders are continuously reading the situation and evaluating how to adapt their behaviour to it.'

All the models of leadership examined hitherto are partial. They provide valid and helpful insights into one particular aspect of leadership. Some focus on the process by which influence is exerted while others emphasise one or more dimensions of leadership. They are mostly normative and often have vigorous support from their advocates. None of these models provide a complete picture of school leadership.

The Leithwood et al. (1999) typology has been taken as the starting point for presenting and differentiating models of leadership, but it is important to note that other writers have chosen to conceptualise leadership in different ways. One needs to consider here the connections or processes among leaders that are embedded in the context of the organisation. Bryman (1992:16) cautions against 'one approach' in effective leadership, stating that appropriate and effective leadership very much depends on circumstance. Through his work he attempts to identify the contextual basis for leadership effectiveness and the need to ensure that the

leadership is appropriate for the situation. The contextual nature of school leadership is developed more fully in the following chapters of this study in relation to the challenging situations experienced by the headteachers. Like Bryman, it is my belief that effective and appropriate forms of school leadership depend on the external and internal contexts of schools. A school in crisis will invariably require different leadership to one that is highly successful and has a highly competent and motivated staff. These contextual connections are evident in the findings for this thesis and are situated in conversations with headteachers about their perceptions and methods of dealing with challenging situations in their own settings.

The formation of headteachers

A range of studies since 1990 have suggested different ways of exploring leadership formation using fields such as history, psychology, social science and management theory. Educational researchers (Day and Bakiglu, 1996; Gronn, 1999; Ribbins, 2003) have used stages and phases of leadership careers to develop a conceptual model of how educational leaders are formed. The seminal work by Gronn (1999) discusses why leaders get to be leaders and offers an insight into educational leadership from a career perspective, providing a model of the process by which leaders are shaped and formed in different contexts. His framework was found to be useful in revealing how headteachers are shaped for their roles. Whilst this section will primarily focus on Gronn's model of leadership, the work of Day and Bakiglu (1996) and Ribbins (2003) will also be explored. The exploration of the leadership career of headteachers provides a means of doing justice to individual experiences, whilst also highlighting shared features and common themes among the primary school headteachers featured in this study.

Gronn (1999) terms the first stages of influence on a leader as the 'Formation' stage, which encompasses the period from 'infancy to adulthood', identifying family, schooling and peer reference groups as important in providing what he describes as 'scaffolding of a character structure' (1999:32). The second stage, 'Accession', is described as when individuals experience a range of roles, equip themselves with a variety of skills and begin to assemble and rehearse a 'role repertoire' (1999:36). The third stage Gronn describes is that of 'Incumbency', which is about the period of headship. This study focuses on the incumbency stage, whereby leaders are in post and performing as headteachers. The fourth and final stage is that of 'Divestiture', where Gronn asserts leaders may well lose their 'psychological grip' (1999:39), whether this is due to circumstances impacting on them and therefore involuntary or unplanned, or it may be more a voluntary, planned stage of the leader's career as retirement approaches. This will be an important consideration when exploring how headteachers deal with challenging situations and whether or not the challenging situations they face result in them losing them their 'psychological grip'.

Day and Bakioglu (1996), in their study of headteachers' lives and careers, identify a series of developmental phases which headteachers undergo that are compatible with Gronn's (1999) framework. There are four stages of Day and Bakioglu's (1996) model: Initiation, Development, Autonomy and Disenchantment. The 'Initiation' stage is characterised by two key processes: learning on the job and working within the existing institution's framework. This initiation stage sits well with the exploration of leadership learning experiences of the headteachers through challenging situations. The 'Development' phase as outlined by Day and Bakioglu is also important as this is where consolidation and extension of the leadership role take place. Day and Bakioglu describe the third phase as that of 'Autonomy', whereby

the headteachers have grown in confidence. This, however, can be seen as having both positive and negative effects on leadership effectiveness. Whilst the headteachers may be more confident and in control, this can be under threat from external and internal challenges, which could result in the headteachers losing control and consequently their confidence. If this lack of control persists so much that it has a negative impact on the headteacher's vision for the school, the headteacher may well enter the fourth phase outlined by Day and Bakioglu, that of 'Disenchantment'.

Like Gronn (1999), Ribbins (2003:64) suggests a formation stage where key agencies impact and shape the kind of people 'that prospective headteachers become'. Similarly, Ribbins (2003) describes the second stage of 'Accession' as that time when individuals seek experience and leadership roles in preparation for future headship positions. It is in the third stage, that of 'Incumbency', where Ribbins (2003) suggests an alternative to Gronn's (1999) model and builds on Day and Bakioglu's (1996) four phases. Ribbins (2003) suggests that leaders can take one of two main routes at this stage, either 'Disenchantment' or 'Enchantment'. The direction depends on whether the leader has negative feelings (disillusion and loss of commitment) or positive feelings (confidence and competence) at this stage. If this latter phase occurs, the leader will remain enchanted with headship and will continue to be motivated by professional satisfaction and relationships with colleagues, and will maintain a balance between home and school life. Whether or not the challenging situations described in this study lead to the disenchantment or enchantment of the headteachers is a focus for exploration in this study.

Considering conceptual models of leadership, especially that of ‘leadership character’, gives order to the leadership patterns of the eighteen primary school headteachers participating in this study. All of the participants in this study hold headship positions, so they are in what Gronn (1999:38) describes as the ‘leadership proper’ phase with their length of tenure ranging from three to twenty-five years. In relating some of the above models and themes, there is an attempt to establish whether there is a distinct form of leadership when dealing with challenging situations, with attendant leadership behaviours, strategies and coping mechanisms; and what professional and emotional resourcing is needed to support headteachers when dealing with challenging situations.

Headship

The pace of change in recent years means that the literature about headship has dated quite quickly. What is evident, however, particularly in the later studies, is the intensification and increasingly challenging dimension of the headteacher’s role due to government-mandated initiatives and the responsibilities that accompany them, as well as the changed relationship of headteachers with their key ‘stakeholders’ (i.e children, staff, parents and governors). In this respect recently appointed headteachers have been appointed into a totally different world of education than their more experienced counterparts. Whilst many experienced headteachers might claim that the job of being a headteacher has always been challenging, recent studies highlight the negative impact of externally driven change and its accompanying tensions (Fidler and Atton, 2004; Crawford, 2009; Thomson, 2009).

These findings are mirrored in the research of Barrett-Baxendale and Burton (2009:91), which examines how the 'management of change' through 'the unremitting plethora of government initiatives has resulted in the gradual attrition of the traditional role of the headteacher'.

Towards the end of the interview participants were asked to recount an occasion in their careers when they felt their ability to conduct their role had been compromised. Without exception, respondents conceded such an experience. These responses usually related to periods of challenge from either internal or external sources (Barrett-Baxendale and Burton, 2009:103).

Day, Leithwood and Sammons (2008) provide a relatively recent study indicating what we have learnt about the role of the headteacher and what we need to know more about. From the data, Day et al. (2008) confirm that the headteachers adopt different behavioural approaches to leadership depending on context. They identify four core sets of leadership qualities and practices: 'building vision and setting directions; understanding and developing people; redesigning the organisation; and managing (directly and through others) the teaching and learning programmes' (2008:85). They also highlight the differences in the degree and emphasis of leadership qualities and practices between headteachers in relatively advantaged and relatively disadvantaged schools; not the subject of this study, but another possible influential factor when exploring challenging situations in primary headship.

Interestingly there is far less written about how headship changes over time than is written about leadership style and strategy. Table 2.2, shows a summary from a selection of contemporary research into headship and how it changes over time (Brighouse and Woods, 1999; Hobson and Brown, 2003; Earley and Weindling, 2004; Fidler and Atton, 2004; PWC, 2007; Glatter, 2008, 2009). The table shows timescales for the length of early, middle and late headship and also reveals some undeniable patterns in relation to the challenging experiences

described by the headteachers such as ‘isolation’, ‘feeling the crunch’ and ‘decline and withdrawal’.

Table 2.2: A summary from a selection of contemporary research into headship and how it changes over time.

Phase	Timescale	Characteristics
Early Headship	1–3 yrs	Initial short-term, high-impact strategies Feelings of exhaustion and isolation
Middle Headship	3–10 yrs	Tackling longer-term, deeper-rooted issues Feelings of exhaustion and isolation More on top of the job – making a real difference Reaching the summit Feeling the crunch – a time to review and plan for succession Consideration of second headship
Late Headship	10+ yrs	Diversification Growing system leadership and networking Feelings of exhaustion and isolation Decline and withdrawal Exit strategy

(Brighouse and Woods, 1999; Hobson and Brown, 2003; Earley and Weindling, 2004; Fidler and Atton, 2004; PWC 2007; Glatter, 2008, 2009)

In early headship, Earley and Weindling (2004) found that most initial activities undertaken by the headteacher did not have to involve others. There is a perceived need to act quickly and to make a mark. Fidler and Atton (2004) exemplify such actions as changing the school uniform, remodelling the school reception area and dealing firmly with pupil discipline. Hobson and Brown (2003) emphasise the difficulties facing new heads in terms of their professional isolation and loneliness; the legacy of the previous headteacher; managing time and priorities; school budget; staffing issues; government initiatives and problems with site management, whilst Glatter (2009) recounts the multitude of day-to-day pressures and changing demands found to be unsettling to new headteachers. An interesting outcome from

the Earley and Weindling (2004) research, and one that will be further explored in this study, is that most headteachers, regardless of their length of tenure, experience professional isolation and loneliness, especially during times of challenge and conflict.

Brighouse and Woods (1999) note some significant changes in terms of the operational issues of moving from early headship to middle headship. There tends, in this phase, to be a focus on implementing an extended agenda of school improvement, an increasing willingness to involve others in school leadership and a more relaxed approach regarding risk-taking. Brighouse and Woods stress that whilst middle headship feels more controlled and less stressful, it does not appear that this second stage is entirely smooth, as the deeper-rooted problems now being tackled need grasping and are mostly personnel-related. Brighouse and Woods say that such ‘thorny’ issues need resilience and strength of character. This concurs with the findings of Fidler and Atton (2004), who describe ‘a crunch’ when some headteachers re-evaluate, re-energise and reinvent themselves. Headteachers who recognise this phase might decide to move on to pastures new, thus avoiding stagnation and decline. In general, research shows that successful early headship is likely to be followed by a productive 5–6 years of middle headship. Conversely, a difficult early headship may be followed by limited middle headship and early withdrawal.

Brighouse and Woods (1999) point out that some experienced school leaders (late headship) never make their mark, with the onset of ‘decline and withdrawal’ coming quickly. As an ex-headteacher with over twelve years headship experience, I would question such a negative perspective of late headship. Brighouse and Wood’s book is written by two vastly experienced educational professionals. However, these statements are made as assertions,

using quotes from practising teachers and headteachers in schools, to illustrate their points and are not overtly grounded in any substantial research findings. Southworth (2004) reveals a more positive perspective on late headship than that of Brighouse and Woods. He suggests that beyond ten years in post, headteachers see the school as congruent with their individual aspirations and become sustainers rather than developers. Southworth (2004) highlights a number of important issues emerging out of this that have implications for this study and the leadership learning experiences of headteachers when dealing with challenging situations. These issues are evidenced in the closing pages of his study of the working life of a primary headteacher over a number of months when he concludes that:

The idea of headteacher maturation warrants close examination. At present the idea of phases of headship is notional. It is unclear whether headteacher development occurs as a result of time in post, experience of different schools and/or life circumstances. Nor is it understood how professional development opportunities influence headteacher development. There is much to investigate here (Southworth, 2004:219).

Fidler and Atton (2004) point out that second headship may become the norm after 7–10 years in post for an experienced headteacher. For a relatively young first-time headteacher, third and fourth headships may not be out of the question. Earley and Weindling's (2004) research into headteachers' attitudes suggests that most opt for an 'easier' second school, having learnt the hard way. Fidler and Atton's (2004) research disagrees with this, asserting that second headships can be much more challenging than first headships and may well be a conscious career choice for some headteachers.

The preceding section provides strong evidence to support the argument that headteachers currently learn and perform their jobs in a context of school reform and continual challenge. Schools are described as dynamic, constantly changing institutions (Bottery, 2004; Duignan, 2004; Fidler and Atton, 2004) and the increasing complexity of schools influences the

complexity of the headteacher's role. The following sections explore the literature related to the challenging situations experienced by leaders and the influence of these challenges on their learning.

Challenging situations

The aim of this study is to reveal the impact of challenging situations on the leadership learning experiences of primary school headteachers. Research question one poses the following question: *What are the challenging situations faced by primary school headteachers?*

In their exploration of leadership challenges Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) found that leaders generally categorise situations into those that are either structured or unstructured and that a leader's actions would vary according to how the leader categorised the situation. For those situations that are structured or familiar, leaders respond in habitual ways that have worked in the past and that have yielded acceptable results. However, when a situation is unstructured, this will often present a challenge and leaders sometimes respond in unprogrammed ways. Leithwood and Steinbach explain that when leaders run into an unstructured situation, they run into a dilemma. The dilemma presented by a new situation and the need to perform can lead to a disorienting challenging situation.

Grint (2005:13) defines leadership by the type of problem an organisation faces. In the following he categorises problems as 'tame', 'critical' or 'wicked':

- *Tame* problems are where the causes of the problem are known and can be tackled by applying known processes through conventional plans and projects.

- *Critical* problems threaten the operations of the organisation in the short term. Decisive action is called for and people are required to follow the call for action in a highly disciplined way.
- *Wicked* problems involve complex challenges that can rarely be solved and which tend to have multiple stakeholders who have different perceptions of both the problem and the solution.

Grint goes on to describe the type of approach leaders need to take when faced with these problems. He suggests that ‘tame’ problems require management, ‘critical’ problems require commanders, whilst ‘wicked’ problems require leadership.

There has been a relatively limited amount of research completed within the educational sector that focuses on how individuals and organisations cope with challenging situations and what it is that enables them to do so effectively. Tripp’s (1993) research into critical incidents provides a working definition for what constitutes critical incidents but does not provide help in determining what it is that shapes a leader’s ability to deal with critical incidents. Carrying out a search on critical incidents reveals that much of the literature is concerned with the emergency services – with business, military or political crises – and very little is concerned with education. Consequently there is no universal definition of a critical incident, but terms like ‘emergency’, ‘major incident’, ‘accident’, ‘critical incident’ and ‘disaster’ (Flin, 1996) are used interchangeably to describe similar events, although major incidents and disasters are seen to be on a larger scale. Tripp (1993:8) does, however, provide a definition of a critical incident that, for the purpose of this research, is helpful:

Critical incidents are not ‘things’ which exist independently of an observer and are awaiting discovery like gold nuggets or desert islands, but like all data, critical incidents are created ... To take something as a critical incident is a value judgement we make, and the basis of the judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident.

Defining challenging situations

The terminology used in this study is that of ‘challenging situations’ rather than ‘critical incidents’. This terminology is used for a good reason. Educational research shows that incidents within school very rarely turn into emergencies or develop into a crisis. They are often smaller incidents that can take on a greater significance depending on the context and those involved (Bennis, 2003; Bottery, 2004; Mander, 2008). However, coping with the anxiety and stress an incident raises, making well-informed and effective decisions and managing others when coping with these incidents places considerable pressure on those involved. Challenging situations can therefore be produced by the way a leader looks at a situation and interprets its significance. What makes an incident ‘challenging’ is that it is memorable and interpreted as significant by the observer. Much of the research on life history, which incorporates critical incidents, reaches a similar conclusion. Gronn (1999:28) discusses ‘critical turning points’ in his phases of leadership development. He suggests that they can be in the form of temporary setbacks or ‘defining moments’ (1999:25) in the life of the leader. The importance of these are illustrated in his concluding remarks about the headteachers in his study, where he suggests that such experiences ‘helped them define their educational philosophies and hone their skills’ (1999:25).

Research by Mander (2008:5) provides a typology of what he describes as ‘professional critical incidents’ which is useful here:

The specifics of the incident may not always be important; it is the reactions an incident provokes from those directly and indirectly involved that matter most. This could be perceived as negative at first but have a positive effect on an individual’s subsequent self-efficacy and being the locus of control.

Mander's (2008) study shows that whilst an incident on its own might not be challenging, when combined with other incidents and leadership emotions it can become so. This is of real significance in terms of the emotional reactions and resilience of headteachers when dealing with challenging situations and the link between emotional and educational leadership is discussed later on in this chapter. Mander (2008:8) suggests that sometimes these challenges are so critical that they place considerable pressure on those involved with them, whilst at other times they are small, often insignificant, but 'their cumulative effect can be felt to be equally challenging'. In line with the work of Gronn (1999) a central tenet of Mander's research is that there are certain events, experiences or occurrences in the lives and history of leaders that may be instrumental in shaping their attitudes and ability to cope with problems and dilemmas.

Complexity and ambiguity

The theme of this study is the leadership learning of headteachers through challenging situations. As previously discussed the contemporary perspective on leadership approaches it as an interactive, social process. 'Leadership is seen here as embedded in relationships, context and task performance and operating in conditions of complexity and ambiguity' (Glatter, 2004:215). The ability of leaders to live with uncertainty and learn from mistakes, show agility and adaptability, work across boundaries and build relationships is cited by educational writers (Fullan and Miles, 1992; Eraut, Alderton, Cole and Senker, 2002; Bennis, 2003; Glatter, 2004; Crawford, 2009) as likely to become even more important in the future based on current contextual trends in educational leadership:

The concept of a knowledge-based economy and the metaphor of a learning organization derive from recognition of the complexities and uncertainties of the modern world (Eraut et al., 2002:108).

West-Burnham (2002:2) says that it is in the interest of leaders to work to create a culture that 'optimises effective collaboration and enhances interpersonal relationships'. Fullan (2001) is in agreement and emphasises the importance of relationships in schools by entitling an entire chapter of his book 'Relationships, Relationships, Relationships'. Fullan (2001:51) asserts: 'if moral purpose is job one, relationships are job two, as you can't get anywhere without them.' He uses Kouzes and Posner's (1995:54–55) seven essentials for developing relationships: (1) setting clear standards; (2) expecting the best; (3) paying attention; (4) personalising recognition; (5) telling the story; (6) celebrating together; (7) setting the example. Fullan (1995:67) states that 'collaborative cultures, which by definition have close relationships, are indeed powerful', but warns that 'unless they are focusing on the right things they end up going powerfully wrong'.

Findings from an early study by Handy (1994) indicate that the most difficult challenges facing leaders present themselves as dilemmas or tensions that are, usually, people-centred and based around relationships. This is evidenced very clearly in the preceeding studies on headship. Perhaps there is nothing unique about this situation, because of the high level of socially driven permutations to be found in schools. Handy (1994) suggests that such relationship tensions are 'endemic' given the complex, uncertain and turbulent world of constant change in contemporary organisations. Leaders, he argues, are faced with relationship tensions that are 'inevitable, endemic and perpetual' and points out that paradoxes confuse us because 'we are asked to live with contradictions and with simultaneous opposites' (1994:45).

West-Burnham's (2009) study of outstanding leaders identifies the symbiotic relationship between personal growth, professional growth and effective learning, confirming the view of school leadership as essentially a human and values-driven activity that involves building and sustaining relationships. West-Burnham states that outstanding leaders balance personal and professional growth, are open to a wide range of learning experiences and are able to learn from a wide range of experiences. He also says that if one of these elements is not fully developed, the other factors are seriously compromised with significant implications for leadership effectiveness and personal and professional sustainability. Day et al. (2010) concur, stating that headteachers achieve success by building relationships inside and outside the school community, thus engendering trust and mutual respect from parents, staff and pupils.

Trust

An accumulating body of research reveals that trust is a fundamentally important component of effective organisations (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Duignan, 2006; Day et al., 2010, Kutsyruba, Walker and Noonan, 2011). As previously discussed, some of the key challenges for educational leaders involve complex and often conflicting human relationships and interactions, which can sometimes lead to a breakdown of trust between those within the organisation. Tschannen-Moran (2004) outlines the need for trusting leadership for all stakeholders in education. She argues that teachers rely on trust in order to cope with the complexities, stresses, changes and demands of the teaching profession. She further contends that schools need trusting relationships with parents and the broader community to garner additional resources, develop partnerships and increase parental involvement in their children's educational process.

Bryk and Schneider (2002:23) distinguish between three types of trust:

- Organic trust is based on the unquestioning acceptance by an individual of the moral and social integrity of a community;
- Contractual trust is based on reciprocity – it is essentially transactional;
- Relational trust is the product of human relationships and interactions – it is characterised by rich networks and high social interdependence.

Bryk and Schneider claim that neither organic trust nor contractual trust is appropriate for schools. Organic trust does not work, they say, because schools are now more open and diverse. Contractual trust does not fit within the framework of school because (a) the aims of schools are multiple and interrelated; (b) the specific mechanisms that contribute to student learning are complex and diffuse; and (c) to monitor best practices is logistically not feasible. They describe relational trust as an intermediate case between the unquestioning acceptance of beliefs found in organic trust and the material exchanges directing contractual trust. They define relational trust as having four interconnected considerations. The first criteria – ‘respect’ – involves the recognition of the important role each party (headteachers, teachers, parents, community and students) plays in the success of schools. The second criteria – ‘competence’ – relates to the headteacher’s ability to effectively execute formal role responsibilities. Identified as the most powerful dimension of trust, ‘personal regard’ for others is noted as the actions taken by a member of a role set to reduce another’s sense of vulnerability. In this domain, trust deepens when people see that others care about them and are willing to extend themselves beyond their role. The final criterion identified by the authors is ‘integrity’. Integrity has to do with consistency between what people say and do and implies that a moral ethical perspective guides one’s work (Bryk and Schneider, 2002:71).

Complementing the work of Bryk and Schneider, Tschannen-Moran (2004) defines five facets in which headteachers convey trust. The first is benevolence, which is concerned with the faith that a person's well-being or personal interest will be protected by another party. The researcher asserts that school leaders display benevolence by showing consideration and empathy to the needs of teachers, protecting their rights, and not exploiting them for self interests. Tschannen-Moran (2004) also identifies honesty as being a fundamental facet of trust. She asserts that honesty is related to a 'person's character, their integrity, and authenticity' (2004:22). Similar to Bryk and Schneider's concept of integrity, honesty reflects the correspondence between what headteachers say and how they behave. For example, honesty is achieved when headteachers unveil a new vision or new programmes and implement as well as uphold the principles of their own initiatives (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Openness, which is concerned with people making themselves vulnerable to others by disclosing personal information, influence and control, is another domain of trust defined by the author. School leaders show openness in information by 'disclosing facts, alternatives, judgments, intentions, and feelings' (2004:25). 'Reliability', the ability that a person can depend on another consistently, is another manner in which trust functions in schools, claims Tschannen-Moran. Headteachers garner trust by showing consistency in their actions, and providing continual dependability to their school community. The final discernment of trust noted by Tschannen-Moran, which is also an identical domain in Bryk and Schneider, is competence. Along the same lines of Bryk and Schneider, competence specifically relates to the ability to perform a task as expected.

Educational writers describe trust as the 'connective tissue' that binds schools together and this image helps to reinforce the importance of healthy relationships to effective learning

(Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Bottery, 2004; Covey, 2006). Bottery (2004) suggests that there are three principal foundations for trust: first, an agreement on values and value priorities; second, people doing what they say they are going to do (Brighouse (2002) calls this ‘the litmus test of trust’) and third, perceptions of competence of those doing the job. Bottery (2004:102) also highlights the need to recognise the two-way nature of trust:

being trusted evokes very different emotions, being perceived by those upon whom the judgement is made as a moral judgement about them and their character. Failure to recognize that utilitarian trust judgements produce deep emotional reactions, because they are taken instead as ethical judgements on individual integrity, suggests a lack of awareness of the nature and dynamic of trust.

I wholeheartedly agree with this. It is difficult, in my opinion, to envisage any aspect of a leader’s work that is not profoundly dependent on trust – indeed it could be argued that it would be impossible for leaders to work without trust.

Covey (2006:19) is unambiguous about the status and role of trust in organisational life:

When trust is high, the dividend you receive is like a performance multiplier ... In a company high trust materially improves communication, collaboration, execution, innovation ... In your personal life, high trust significantly improves your excitement, energy, passion, creativity and joy in your relationships.

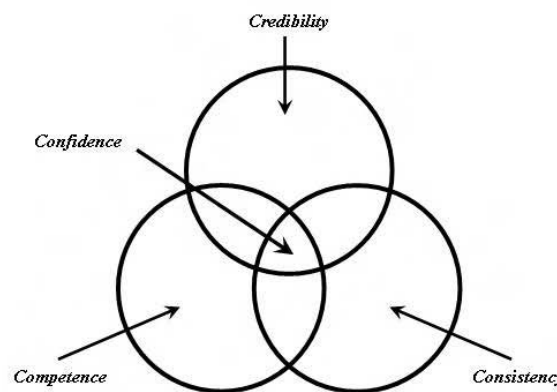
I was impressed by Coleman’s (2008) ideas on ‘connected leaders’, which argue that modern leaders engage with employees and improve performance by building on trust, giving meaning to workplace relationships and by creating dialogue within the organisation. Three dimensions to connected leadership behaviour are indicated in the work: the *leader as risk taker*, with the emphasis on entrepreneurship; the *leader as influencer*, with the idea that by engaging others in a genuine shared meaningful endeavour one can increase organisational performance by up to thirty per cent; and the *leader as supporter*, encouraging people by

developing relationships based on integrity, the offer to be useful, warmth, reciprocity in respect of each another's goals and helping with those routine connections which keep one in touch with what is actually going on. Critical factors here are the leader's credibility (integrity rather than perfection) and trust (among colleagues and with partner organisations).

In Figure 2.1, John West-Burnham (2009:4) depicts trust in leadership as the interaction of three key variables:

- Credibility: the extent to which a leader has integrity
- Consistency: authentic behaviour, openness, reliability, 'Do as I do'
- Competence: professional ability and expertise.

Figure 2.1: Developing outstanding leaders.



Credibility + consistency + competence = confidence = trust

(West-Burnham, 2009:4)

According to West-Burnham, 'The leader who demonstrates these three factors will be the person who inspires confidence that is the basis of trust in leadership' (2009:4).

What comes through the literature is the ease with which trust appears to be broken during periods of tension, challenge and change. Brewster and Railsback (2003:23) highlight some of the common barriers to developing and maintaining trusting relationships such as ‘ineffective communication’ and ‘lack of follow-through’. Unsurprisingly then, where there is mistrust between staff, the process of reclaiming it is often very difficult. Kutsyruba et al. (2011:84) say that the ‘reparation of broken trust is not an easy undertaking’ and can be a ‘long and difficult process’ of restoration but worthy of the ‘investment of time and energy required by the repair process’.

Strategies for dealing with challenging situations

Research question two asks the following: *What determines the strategies headteachers use to deal with challenging situations?* The purpose of this section is to consider studies on how school leaders deal with challenging situations in order to support our understanding of how challenging situations help leaders learn to lead.

Problem solving

Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) have played a significant role in refining a research focus on the problem-solving behaviour of educational leaders. Their initial research studies focused on the steps undertaken by principals and superintendents as they reasoned through how they would handle particular problems, some of which were ‘structured’ and others ‘unstructured’ or ill-defined. Their research on principals finds that those individuals identified as ‘expert’ principals differ from those identified as ‘typical’ principals in the way they address various aspects of problem-solving, including problem definition and the development of solutions. A major contribution of this work is the recognition that problem-solving is a complex construct

that needs to be subdivided into component elements in order to be understood. Leithwood et al. (2006) identifies six key elements of problem-solving: interpretation, goals, principles and values, constraints, solution process and affects. They argue that the ability to deal with critical incidents rests on a handful of personal traits:

The most successful school leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others. They are also flexible rather than dogmatic in their thinking within a system of core values, persistent (e.g. in their pursuit of high expectations of staff motivation, commitment, learning and achievement for all), resilient and optimistic (Leithwood et al., 2006:14).

Recent NCSL research identified a number of behavioural characteristics that were indicative of effective leaders in challenging contexts, although the study rightly concludes that this could be extended to all leaders (Flintham, 2008). These characteristics include having a central focus on vision, morals and values and being emotional resilient. These characteristics are seen as providing a strong evidence base in understanding the behaviours of leaders and the factors which guide their leadership practice, particularly for those in challenging situations, and represent the inter-related themes of values and emotional resilience that are explored in the following sections of the chapter.

Vision

An accumulating body of knowledge suggests that leaders have the responsibility of creating a vision, communicating it to others and influencing others to create and sustain a collective mission (Sergiovanni, 2001; Lambert, 2002; McEwan, 2003; Day, 2003; Day et al., 2010). McEwan (2003) states that vision is defined as the driving force that reflects the leaders' values, beliefs and experiences, and posits that school leaders are charged with the responsibility of having a vision, communicating it to others, and fostering collaboration for a

shared vision that will lead to school achievement. Similarly, Sergiovanni (2001:202) claims that effective school leaders:

- Visualise what the members of the school can do.
- Articulate a vision and build a shared covenant for the school.
- Embody the vision in the school's structure, policies, and procedures.
- Provide a mechanism for change.

In the same vein, a very recent study by Day et al. (2010) suggests that building positive school environments requires a focus on values, stating that teachers and students succeed in a school culture that fosters hard work, shows moral purpose, has a commitment to values, pays attention to problem-solving and focuses on learning for all students.

Morals

The theoretical and empirical aspects of moral leadership and the need for the adoption of ethical and moral standards to guide and sustain leadership practice are recurring themes in educational leadership literature (Leithwood et al., 1999; Sergiovanni, 2001; Brighouse, 2002; Starratt, 2004; Greenfield, 2004; Begley and Stefkovich, 2004). The most popular theories are located in the 'transformational' model of leadership discussed earlier in this chapter, which focuses on the capacity of leaders to make a difference through their ability to 'transform' (Sergiovanni, 2001). In his discussion of moral leadership in schools, Greenfield (2004:174) describes it as a 'twofold' construct:

First, the education of the public's children is by its very nature a moral activity ... second, relationships among people are at the very center of the work of school administrators and for this reason school leadership is, by its nature and focus, a moral activity.

Greenfield presents a compelling case for moral leadership in schools in enabling school leaders to develop and empower teachers in the 'context of external pressures to reform schools' (2004:174). Fullan (2001) agrees, stating that the moral purpose of a leader and the success of an organisation are synonymous.

Values

Recently there has been a growing interest in studying values as a compelling dimension of educational leadership (Brighouse, 2002; Begley and Stefkovich, 2004; Duignan, 2006) and leadership is increasingly linked with values in contemporary educational writing. Leaders are expected to ground their actions in clear personal and professional values and to ensure the focus values are grounded in the betterment of the children, young people and staff who work in the school. Duignan (2006) explores the notion of 'authenticity' as a central feature of moral leadership, stating that the authenticity of the leader stems first from the quality of private commitment to a personal set of values.

Gold et al. (2003) cite evidence from ten case studies of 'outstanding' school leaders (as judged by Ofsted) to show that school leaders 'remained committed to a set of strongly held values'. 'Principled' school leaders accordingly continue to 'exist' (2003:136). Such perspectives resonate with the work of Duignan (2006) on the realm of authenticity and values in educational management. Leithwood and colleagues (Leithwood and Riehl, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2006) have investigated leaders' behaviours and found that deliberate consideration of values is one of the fundamental processes they use in solving problems. Leithwood et al. (2006) conducted a series of research projects on how values influence school leaders' problem-solving. They found that values influence the problem-solving

process both directly and indirectly. In direct influence, values acting as preferences dictate school leaders' actions. In indirect influence, values act as filters that determine the salience of external factors in problem-solving.

The challenges facing many leaders in contemporary service organisations are seen as complex and multidimensional (Duignan and Collins, 2003). Many of the challenges present themselves as tensions where choices are often between 'right-and-right', rather than 'right-or-wrong', alternatives or the gap between what is and what ought to be. Duignan (2003) echoes the work of Day (2003:14) when he argues that leaders:

have to make choices in ... paradoxical situations [and therefore] require more than management skills and competencies ... Above all, they need sound judgement and a wisdom derived from critical reflection on the meaning of life and work. They have to be people of heart who are emotionally mature enough to develop mutually elevating and productive relationships.

Studies have also explored the notion of 'value conflict' (Bottery, 2004; Begley and Stefkovich, 2004; Duignan, 2006; Beatty, 2008). Begley and Stefkovich's (2004) inquiry into school leadership led them to conclude that headteachers faced moral, ethical and professional value conflicts more forcibly now than in the past:

value conflicts now seem to have become a defining characteristic of the school leadership role. The work of educational leaders has become more complex, much less predictable, less structured and more conflict laden (Begley and Stefkovich, 2004:134).

Distributed leadership

In the past decade there has been a general desire to move towards 'distributed' leadership as a leadership strategy in schools. This approach, with its foundations in sociology, psychology

and politics rather than management science, views leadership as a process that is diffused throughout an organisation rather than lying solely with the formally designated 'leader'. The emphasis thus shifts from developing 'leaders' to developing 'leaderful' organisations with a collective responsibility for leadership:

Distributed leadership is an idea that is growing in popularity. There is widespread interest in the notion of distributing leadership although interpretations of the term vary. A distributed leadership perspective recognizes that there are multiple leaders and that leadership activities are widely shared within and between organizations (Harris, 2008:31).

Distributed leadership is based on the premise that shared leadership is potentially more effective than an individual leader and, certainly in terms of 'learning to lead', staff are indeed entitled to learn through this experience. Thus, distributed leadership reduces the power 'over', further suggesting that it is more than 'enabling others to act', to one of a shared responsibility to lead. Transformational and distributed forms of leadership are not necessarily contradictory, but sit alongside each other on a continuum of leadership. Indeed, Muijs et al. (2006) report on the term 'shared transformational leadership' as being coined to describe the interaction of both types of leadership to promote reform and change in a more sustainable way by involving staff at all levels. The emphasis, here, is on the use of collaborative styles and strategies which build competencies and capacities among teachers and students alike, ensuring the burdens of leadership do not rest on one set of shoulders.

Perhaps one of the strongest themes to emerge from the existing literature on effective school leadership relates to the importance of developing staff, nurturing talent and related to this 'distributing' leadership throughout the organisation (Leithwood et al., 2006:8).

This distinct power shift from the earlier literature suggesting leaders have power 'over', to one of leadership power 'with', is vitally important when studying the leadership learning

experiences of headteachers. Distributed leadership suggests an openness and flexibility of the boundaries of leadership with the development of leaders throughout the school. This puts leadership influence and responsibility in the hands of a number of individuals. The issue that needs to be considered here is how one can ascertain how leaders learn to lead when leadership is shared between a number of stakeholders.

A degree of caution needs to be exercised when considering distributed leadership in educational settings, in my opinion. Distributed leadership needs to take into account the balance of power between workers which is, for the most part, determined by the formal positions they hold within an organisation, meaning that in many schools there are structural, legal and resource constraints around flatter staff structures. Neither should one neglect the attitudinal perceptions among staff, parents and other stakeholders that place the headteacher firmly in the forefront of the decision-making process of the school.

Fullan (2003:xv), for example, while paying due attention to notions of distributed leadership, by acknowledging that it is only by developing leadership in others that principals can accomplish their tasks, nevertheless recognizes that ‘the principal’ or head of the school [is] the focal point (Bottery, 2004:21).

The extent and degree to which leadership is distributed or shared in schools will be of importance when exploring the findings on the strategies headteachers use when dealing with challenging situations.

Coping mechanisms for dealing with challenging situations

The next section examines the literature related to research question three – *Which coping mechanisms do headteachers exhibit when dealing with challenging situations?* – and provides an insight into the behaviours exhibited by leaders when dealing with challenging situations.

Emotional intelligence

In the past decade there has been significant research that shows that a leader's emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2000, 2005; Crawford, 2007, 2009) is a major determinant of leadership effectiveness and leadership sustainability. Goleman Boyatzis and McKee (2002:41) state that 'a leader's emotional style also drives everyone else's moods and behaviours – through a neurological process called mood contagion'. According to Goleman, a leader's emotional intelligence impacts within an organisation in a similar way that electricity travels over wires throughout a house. Goleman (2005:47) explains that emotional intelligence is how well a person:

- Prevents strong emotions such as anxiety, anger and ecstasy from affecting their performance.
- Recognises and clearly expresses their emotions
- Accurately understands others' emotions in one-to-one situations, groups and other settings
- Generates and integrates accurate emotional data into their thinking, reasoning and decision-making
- Manages their own and others' emotions

Goleman (2005:47) also states that 'high levels of emotional intelligence create climates in which information sharing, trust, healthy risk taking, and learning flourish. Low levels of

emotional intelligence create climates rife with fear and anxiety.’ Recent research (Bottery, 2007; Beatty, 2008; Crawford, 2007, 2009) has resulted in a higher profile for the significance of emotions in educational leadership. Crawford (2007:87) highlights the importance of emotions in the lives and roles of headteachers:

People and relationships, and the social interactions this invokes, are woven into the fabric of the everyday life of a Headteacher in primary schools. Each social encounter evokes an emotional response, sometimes immediately visible physically in the participants. Recognizing and handling such emotion is an important aspect of everyday social interplay.

Crawford (2007:525) argues that despite the recent emphasis on distributed leadership, headship is the crucial factor in a school and sets the context for all other personal relationships in the school:

I suggest that the central issue that links the study of emotion to the study of leadership is that working with others requires connectness not only with other people but also with the Headteacher’s own short term feelings, and longer term moods within the social setting of the school.

More recent research by Crawford (2009) reflects that of Sergiovanni (2001) when she describes the leader’s relationships with staff, pupils and parents as being at the ‘heart’ of education. The headteacher in this instance is at the centre of these professional emotional relationships: ‘the pivotal emotional figure’ (2001:29).

Defining resilience

Emotion comes from the Latin *emovere*, meaning ‘to disturb’, and as such seems to be a natural and inevitable part of leadership life and obviously becomes more pronounced in a challenging situation. Dictionaries define resilience as ‘the ability to recover quickly’ and ‘the property of a material that resumes its original shape after distortion’. The antonyms for

‘resilience’ are words like ‘fragility’, ‘inflexibility’ and ‘weakness’. So traditionally resilience is something to be admired: a resilient individual or community is one able to withstand the stresses of a radical challenge to the status quo, one that does not crumble under pressure.

Emotional resilience

The concept of emotional resilience and how this intersects with the other factors that influence one’s capacity to cope with challenging situations is evident in the literature. Flin (1996:8) describes emotional resilience as ‘the capacity to withstand and renew oneself in light of life stressors, thrive and make meaning from challenge’ and proposes one of the significant factors in coping with crisis is one’s ability to cope with stress:

The central process involved in building resilience is the training and development of adaptive coping skills. Coping strategies are generally either outwardly focused on the problem (problem-solving), inwardly focused on emotions (emotion-focused) or socially focused, such as emotional support from others.

According to Beatty (2008), our emotions arise in our daily lives largely in terms of problems to be solved. In challenging situations, therefore, the relationship dimension is likely to surface because the social and emotional leadership dimensions often intensify. Beatty (2008:7) is very clear about the significance of emotions in developing and sustaining relationships, especially when there is conflict or challenge:

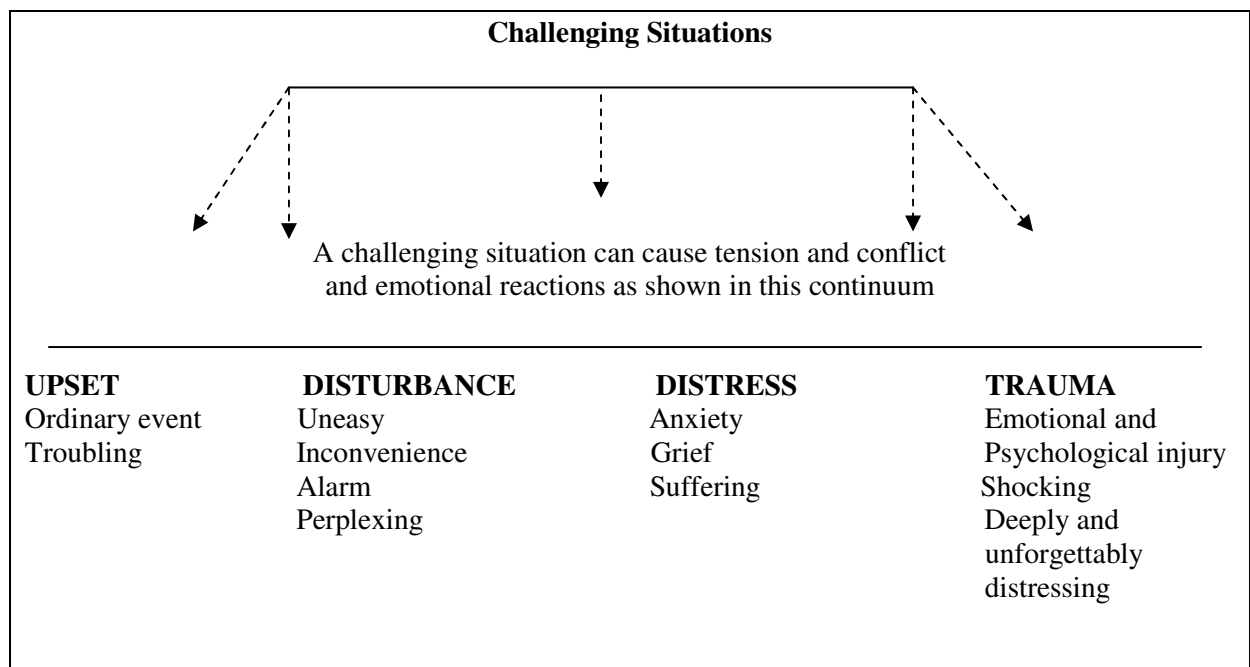
To maintain relationships, one must understand the emotions that endanger them, especially in times of betrayal and wounding. We all need to learn to engage in reflective emotional meaning making to be able to enact our commitment to connectedness. This is how we sustain the relationships upon which our very survival depends.

This is also explored by Duignan (2006), who identifies the key challenges for educational leaders as involving complex and often conflicting human relationships and interactions. I

would agree with his assertion that these are ‘the ones that keep educational leaders awake at night’ (2006:42) and the suggestion that these are invariably linked to the emotions and value conflict identified earlier in this chapter.

Adapted from Mander (2008:8), Figure 2.2, shows that emotional reactions to challenging situations can be seen to form a continuum:

Figure 2.2: Emotional reactions to challenging situations in the form of a continuum.



(Mander, 2008:8)

Mander (2008) describes how challenging situations can generate an emotional response at any point along this continuum and subsequent action and consequences can move this response along the continuum in either direction. Maslin-Ostrowski (2007:7) uses the term ‘woundings’ to describe emotional reactions to challenging situations, stating that these are moments that are loaded with potential for learning:

Understanding the meaning of wounding through the prism of the educational leader's experience offers a path, not only to real leadership but to being a real person in one's leadership. The leadership wound, itself, represents an extraordinary source of learning and a critical opening to what may be most at stake in the practical exercise of leadership; namely, one's self .

Beatty (2008:11) concurs, saying that leaders need to be emotionally prepared for this:

When leaders enter into processes that deepen the support systems within themselves they develop new neural pathways. They can do this by connecting candidly and regularly with their colleagues, and thereby become stronger and better prepared emotionally to take each new experience – even and especially the painful ones – as an opening for new learning.

It is critically important to note here, particularly in relation to this study, that an incident on its own might not present an immediate challenge, but when combined with other incidents and emotions it can become a challenging situation. As educational studies show, sometimes these incidents are so challenging that they place considerable pressure on those involved in them. At other times they are small, often insignificant, but their cumulative effect can be felt to be equally challenging. Providing strategies and support mechanisms to help colleagues in school deal with such incidents would arguably help them to develop increased understanding and control over professional and personal judgements.

Leadership learning

This section explores the literature related to research question four: *What are the effects of challenging situations on the leadership learning experiences of headteachers?* It also summarises some of the most significant insights and findings on leadership learning and highlights major themes and models emanating from the research.

Opportunities for leadership learning

Whilst somewhat dated, Cave and Wilkinson (1992) came to a significant conclusion in their research in identifying that, whilst knowledge and types of skill could be found in a competent leader, above-average leaders were considered to possess in addition certain cerebral or higher order capacities such as ‘reading the situation’, ‘balanced judgment’ and ‘intuition’. Knowledge and skills, in this respect, were regarded as hugely important, but higher order capacities were seen to be crucial in enabling the knowledge and skills to be applied appropriately in the complex situations in which school leaders find themselves daily. Research by Bullock, James and Jamieson (1995:257) identified seven opportunities for leadership learning listed below, which showed very different types of approaches to learning ranging from learning through everyday experience to learning from courses and texts:

- Significant other colleagues
- Courses
- Texts
- Everyday experience
- Delegated responsibilities
- Management experience outside school
- Critical incidents.

Duignan (2004) takes a conceptually different approach to thinking about leadership learning by explaining leadership learning as that which involves moving from competencies to capabilities. In so doing, he does not ignore the need for leaders to develop appropriate skills and knowledge, but suggests that these are not enough for leaders to lead in changing and unpredictable contexts, to lead ethically and be values-orientated. He stresses that leaders ‘first and foremost must influence self through the habit of reflective practice and the desire

for self improvement’, highlighting the need for contextualised learning opportunities (Duignan, 2004:6). In their review of trends in leadership and management development, Hallinger and Kamontip (2005) emphasise similar approaches. They assert the importance of the ‘craft knowledge’ accumulated by practitioners and want learning on the job in the context of the workplace to be given more emphasis in leadership development programmes. They say that ‘in an age of chaotic change school leaders need to develop their affective as well as cognitive capacities to lead’ (Hallinger and Kamontip, 2005:8) and they urge more use of problem-based learning as well as coaching and support to help leaders apply new ideas and skills.

Models of leadership learning

Much of the recent literature on leadership learning is influenced by models of leadership learning that are used to frame leadership development programmes (Leithwood et al., 2006; Bush, 2007; Glatter, 2009). Bush (2007) bases his review of the literature of leadership learning, to propose a set of ‘polar models of leadership learning’ as shown in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Polar models of leadership learning.

Polar models of leadership learning	
Traditional leadership learning Prescribed Standardised Offsite Classroom based Content led Scale Leader development	Twenty-first-century leadership learning Emergent Personalised Onsite Work based Process rich Depth Leadership development

(Bush 2007:394).

The research shows the shift from content-driven, standardised learning to that which is personalised and work based. The authors stress that the models are ideal types and are not intended to be prescriptive but should be used as a starting point for thinking about development programmes for leaders. Glatter (2009:232) suggests the polar models outlined in Table 2.3, need to be considered judiciously, taking into account the following points:

- Moving from content to process has much to be said for it but learning *always* needs a stimulus of some kind.
- Raw experience is not a sufficient guide to learning: leaders may need help in structuring and analysing experience to be able to use it as a resource for learning.
- Emphasising collective not just individual development leadership recognises the significance of distributed leadership but may have unintended effects: there can be high turnover in leadership teams, reducing the impact of team programmes, which may also be negatively affected by the culture and climate of the school.

Whilst Fullan (2002:20) acknowledges the place of formal learning in leadership development, he highlights ‘learning in context’ as that which has the ‘greatest payoff’ because it based on experience and because it builds experience. Vaill’s (1996) learning premise – leading is learning – suggests that no matter how many times a leader has experienced a situation, it is never exactly the same. Vaill defines each new experience as a learning challenge and says that there are always a variety of different details that require a leader to process new information and create new knowledge.

Learning through experience

The relationship between experience and learning is well documented in educational literature (Kolb, 1984; Bryman, 1992; Glatter, 1996; Day, 2003). This section begins by exploring in some detail the influential work of Kolb (1984), which identifies six characteristics of experiential education. Kolb describes learning through experience first as ‘a process’ rather

than something that is based on ‘outcomes’, with the emphasis placed not on *what* people learn, but on *how* they learn. The second characteristic of experiential learning is that it is ‘a continuous process grounded in experience’ (Kolb, 1984:27) shaped by one’s goals or objectives, whilst the third characteristic described by Kolb is that ‘the process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world’ (1984:29). For Kolb, learning is filled with tension created by competing modes of experiential learning. The resolution of that conflict therefore leads to learning; this is of significance when exploring how headteachers learn from dealing with challenging situations. Kolb (1984:31) identifies the fourth characteristic of experiential learning as ‘an holistic process of adaptation to the world’, which includes an individual’s thoughts, feelings, perceptions and behaviours. Fifth, experiential learning is influenced by the context in which an individual acts so that ‘learning involves transactions between the person and the environment’ (1984:34). Learning here is not isolated, or separate from, or theoretical, or hypothetical. It is ‘real’ in that all of what occurs in a given situation becomes part of the experience and becomes food for learning. The sixth and final characteristic of experiential learning presented by Kolb is the ‘process of creating knowledge’ (1984:36), whereby learning is created through a dynamic process during which individuals engage their environment and use their experiences of it as the source for their learning. Kolb’s explanation of experiential learning, delineated by these six characteristics, is strengthened in the arguments made Glatter (2009) and Eraut (2010), who describe learning as that which is not the domain of experts or organisations, but a process that is controlled by the learner.

Kolb’s claims also parallel Bryman’s (1992) in agreeing that context plays an important role in learning and that context cannot be separated from experience. Learning is therefore not

abstract; it is situated in the context. In Kolb's model, learning results predominantly from reflecting on one's experience, not merely by absorbing data presented by another. Individuals begin the process via reflection rather than by relying on someone else to tell them what to learn. In this way they are the ones who determine what they will reflect on, what abstract conceptualisations they will draw, and what active experimentation they will undertake. Kolb and Bryman agree that learning from experience can be powerful but also inefficient, unless it is followed up by formal, systematic opportunities to conceptualise the effect of this experience. Eraut (2010) bemoans the fact that 'learning from experience' has become a catch-all phrase that has dominated both adult learning and learning in the workplace without much critical attention. He suggests that there is confusion in Kolb's work about what constitutes experience, stating that we are probably thinking about a single episode rather than an accumulated learning from a series of episodes. Whilst I am in agreement with Eraut that learning to lead is a gradual process and that we learn from 'the continuous flow of experience throughout our lives' (2010:251), the headteachers in this study were asked to consider their learning from a single experience which they found to be challenging and not a series of challenges.

Contemporary research supports Kolb's argument that reflection is an important condition for headteachers' learning, suggesting that headteachers who exercise metacompetencies such as 'self management, self evaluation and learning from experience' (Glatter, 1996:16) are the most effective. Day (2003:200) examined the relationship between reflection, critical thinking and principal effectiveness and found that the most effective principals were those who were effective 'in a range of contexts' and that:

- reflection was integral to their success;
- the core and informing concepts for reflection were their personal and educative values;
- they reflected simultaneously in, on, about and for their own work;
- reflection was always for the purpose of self-development (they were lifelong learners) as well as for the good of the school;
- reflection combined the cognitive and the emotional .

Many of the models that use experience for learning suggest that the experience happens first and then the learner reflects on it (Schön, 1983; Day, 2003). Used in this way, reflection enables individuals to look back over what happened, analyse it and draw some conclusions. Schön (1983) suggests that reflection can also occur during the experience as individuals use the product of their reflection as the basis for future action. Schön introduced the term reflection-in-action to describe that situation, describing how reflection-in-action occurs when individuals, in the midst of an experience, are able to reflect on the experience as it is happening. There have, however, been critics of the notion of reflection-in-action, which it is claimed is impossible in practice because there is insufficient time at a conscious level to reflect whilst in the action and trying to make sense of it as it is happening (Eraut, 1995).

Whilst Day (2003:201) highlights the need for headteachers to take part in systematic, reflective practices that combine the deliberative with the emotional, he acknowledges, and I am in agreement, that this practice is the exception rather than the norm:

Whether most principals engage in systematic reflection that contributes to their development and capacity to improve the quality of learning opportunities for students remains open to question. Processes of reflection that combine the deliberative with the emotional still seem to be the exception rather than the norm.

This differs with what has been argued above, that adults can *only* use their experiences to learn if they apply a conscious process to it, as outlined by Kolb (1984) and others. It is not that Day is suggesting that leaders cannot learn from experience, rather that his studies demonstrate that *planned* reflection on experience is not the norm for most leaders.

This argument of Day is also reflected in earlier works by Mumford (1994) focusing on the learning experiences of managers in industry. Mumford found that when managers learn, it is not the result of a planned, thoughtful process but it is more likely to be ‘unplanned, solitary, and erratic’ (1994:121). Further, he found that when managers learn from experience, it tends to happen more in those situations that involve challenges. Eraut (2010) broadly agrees, stating that learning from tackling ‘challenging tasks’ if ‘well supported and successful’ leads to improved ‘motivation and confidence’ (2010:267). Mumford concludes that the more challenging the job assignment, the more likely the manager will need to move beyond existing skills and knowledge and therefore be required to learn. This is consistent with Smith and Morphey (1994), who found that the vast majority of managers’ learning came from challenges, and that successes did not contribute to learning. I disagree with the assertion that success does not contribute to learning; however, I accept that Mumford’s and Smith and Morphey’s findings are important because they apply directly to the participants of this study and reinforce what has been described in previous sections of this study.

Formal learning and development

The ways in which headteachers are able to transfer learning from formal programmes and approaches to bridging the divide between formal programmes and the learning experienced in work settings is explored in this section.

In England, since 2008, it has become mandatory for first-time headteachers to gain the NPQH. The rationale underpinning the NPQH is that it provides a baseline of requisite skills and knowledge to assist headteachers to develop their capabilities in order to become effective and strong leaders. The NPQH is underpinned by a set of competency-based standards known as *The National Standards for Headteachers* (DfES, 2004). These standards were created to guide the development of the NPQH. The standards are formulated in terms of:

- Core purpose of headship – to provide professional leadership for a school which secures its success and improvement, ensuring high-quality education for all its pupils and improved standards of learning and achievement
- Key outcomes for schools, pupils, teachers, parents and governors
- Professional knowledge and understanding of sixteen specified areas
- Leadership – the ability to lead and manage people to work towards common goals
- Decision-making skills – the ability to investigate, solve problems and make decisions
- Communication skills – the ability to make points clearly and understand the views of others
- Self-management skills – the ability to plan time effectively and to organise oneself
- Key areas of headship – strategic direction and development of the school; teaching and learning; leading and managing staff; efficient and effective deployment of staff and resources; accountability.

Three key concerns cited by Duignan (2004) are levelled against such competency-based approaches. Duignan asserts that they are (1) narrow and simplistic; (2) acontextual; and (3) individualistic. A dominant view of leadership in the literature is that it is both dynamic and situational and, for this reason, an approach that fragments it into key roles, dimensions and other areas is, I agree, narrow and simplistic. Another concern that has been raised regarding competency-based approaches is that they do not account for complex contextual variables (Duignan, 2004) that interact and intersect with leadership. Eraut (2010) describes the process

of transferring formal learning to the workplace as ‘complicated’ as it involves ‘transforming’ the learning to fit the new situation. Leadership learning needs to be understood within its context and effective leadership performance in one context might not look the same in a different context. Leithwood and Steinbach (2003) agree that a competency-based approach tends to ‘standardise’ experience or ‘stifle variation in leadership performance’ because of a prescribed and acontextual focus. Finally, competency-based approaches for school leaders have conceptualised leadership as an individualistic endeavour (Gronn, 2003) yet contemporary literature has highlighted that leadership is a distributed notion.

Recent studies by McKinsey and Company (2007, 2010) and West-Burnham (2010) argue for greater customisation of leadership development to give leaders a more active involvement in choosing their own learning pathways. This, in my opinion, will require flexible and responsive facilitation and support from experienced personnel. In his study on leadership development Glatter (2009:235) concludes:

There is scope for further work to identify the features of the most effective formal programmes of LD, including how they integrate informal and experiential elements into their design. School leaders in the future are likely to require, to an even greater extent than currently, the attributes of adaptability and creativity combined with conceptual/analytical skill that are thought to underlie the higher order capacities. We should seek to understand these capacities better and learn more about how they can be recognised and developed.

The dichotomy of leadership learning through experience and reflection is that although one might expect that this learning would become a product of practice over time, the range of challenging situations headteachers face throughout their headship can result in steep learning curves whatever their length of tenure and experience. Leadership development and training should, therefore, be made available throughout headship in the form of coaching,

opportunities for structured reflection and regular formal and informal interaction with other headteachers. This we return to in Chapter Six.

Conclusion

As shown in the previous sections of this chapter, there is an abundance of literature on educational leadership, often containing competing and contradictory models and theories. The emergence of transformational and instructional theories focus on the development of dimensions of leadership derived from earlier theories to cope with dynamic and diverse contexts and situations. This literature review reveals a consensus among early and contemporary writers that leading schools is a complex process, with more recent studies highlighting the increasingly challenging dimension of the headteacher's role (Earley and Weindling, 2004; Fidler and Atton, 2004; PwC 2007; Glatter, 2008, 2009).

Studies exploring the strategies and coping mechanisms used by leaders to deal with challenges point to the importance of leaders' vision, values and resilience (Mander, 2008; Beatty, 2008; Crawford, 2009, Day et al., 2010) as well as the need to share leadership and to develop trusting relationships with stakeholders (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Bottery, 2004). However, it takes effort to build this trust, and the research concludes that identifying increased trust as a priority and taking steps to develop it is a worthwhile investment for educational leaders (Kutsyruba et al., 2011).

How leaders learn from challenges and mistakes is explored by contemporary educational writers (Bennis and Thomas, 2002; Eraut et al., 2002; Glatter, 2004; Eraut, 2010) and much of the literature explored in this chapter reveals that leaders tend not to use a conscious process

to learn. The learning that leaders experience tends to be accidental, erratic and after the event, with the attention on solving problems and getting the job done rather than considering what is being learnt from the situation (Kolb, 1984; Bryman, 1992; Glatter, 1996; Day, 2003). The critical role of reflection in any process that leaders employ to learn from experience is highlighted throughout this literature review (Glatter, 1996; Eraut et al., 2002; Day, 2003). What is evident, however, is that reflection for headteachers is not a common or frequently used skill. In recognition of this, assistance in helping headteachers to find pathways through the challenges they face by reflecting on what is happening would be useful in supporting them in their learning.

Literature on more formal methods of training development, a further dimension on learning to lead, is explored in this chapter and what emerges is the general lack of any form of bespoke development of leaders (Duignan, 2004; McKinsey and Company, 2007, 2010; West-Burnham, 2010). Dealing with, and learning from, challenging situations is seen as critical to effective leadership, but the writers acknowledge that opportunities for planned learning whilst doing the job are not as evident in leadership development programmes as they should or could be. This is worthy of further consideration when designing support and development programmes for aspiring and serving headteachers.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

This chapter seeks to explain, critically evaluate and justify the research methodology that will underpin my research. I will, first, locate and justify my research within a wider framework and then clarify my philosophical approach to knowledge by placing it within an ontological and epistemological context. I will then clarify my research methodology, research method and give details of how I managed the project, taking into account issues such as sample, access, ethics, validity and reliability.

Wider framework

In this section, in order to clarify what my research is about, I shall first place it within a wider framework. The seminal work of Habermas (1971) provides a typology of three kinds of research that are possible. This may emanate from a *technical* interest, a *practical* interest or an *emancipatory* interest. A technical interest focuses on tasks. The type of knowledge sought here is known as instrumental with an emphasis on carefully controlled and replicable experiments designed to produce general theories and laws. This is also known as positivism. The second typology involves researching with a practical interest focused on understanding, thus favouring an interpretive mode of enquiry. Here the focus is on people and relationships. The type of knowledge sought is about understanding why we do what we do and how we relate to each other. This mode of enquiry is referred to as interpretivism. The third type of interest a researcher may have is emancipatory and concerned with power and subsequent action. This mode of enquiry is referred to as critical theory. In considering Habermas' typology, I will be taking a practical interest in this research in that I will be trying to reach an

understanding of how headteachers learn to lead through dealing with challenging situations. My mode of enquiry is interpretive in nature.

Ribbins and Gunter (2002:262) suggest that there are six 'knowledge provinces' within which studies may fall, allowing them to be 'mapped' and then related to other studies of educational leadership, where this is required. Their suggested knowledge provinces, and the knowledge claims underpinning them are summarised below:

- *Conceptual*: Concerned with issues of ontology and epistemology, and with conceptual classification.
- *Descriptive*: Seeks to provide a factual report, often in some detail, of one or more aspects of, or factors relating to leaders, leading or leadership.
- *Humanistic*: Seeks to gather and theorise from the experiences and biographies of those who are leaders and managers and those who are managed and led.
- *Critical*: Concerned to reveal and emancipate practitioners from injustice and oppression of established power structures.
- *Evaluative*: Concerned to measure the impact of leadership and its effectiveness of micro, meso and macro levels of interaction.
- *Instrumental*: Seeks to provide leaders and others with effective strategies and tactics to deliver organisational and system level goals.

In attempting to place this research within its wider framework, it is unlikely that it sits purely within any one domain. However, the following definition given of the evaluative domain suggests a reasonably good fit:

In the broadest sense it may be taken to mean any research that seeks to abstract and measure the impact in this case of leadership and its effectiveness at micro, macro and meso levels of social interaction. In a narrower sense it can be thought of as having a special concern for measuring effectiveness and the conditions for improvement (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002:265).

This reflects the purpose of this research in that it attempts to identify and analyse outcomes that are behavioural in nature. This research can also be located in the humanistic domain because the research draws on the headteachers' experiences and so explores 'how knowledge is produced' (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002:267). Overall this research should provide a greater understanding of how leaders learn to lead. The findings from this research should also inform future training and development for headteachers and consequently contribute to the ongoing wider educational debate on large-scale reform.

Philosophical approach

In order to understand the chosen design of this research in terms of method and methodology, it is first necessary to identify my ontological and epistemological position and consequently the methodological premise from which I shall be working.

Put simply, ontology focuses on the reality we seek to know and epistemology focuses on knowledge. Robson (2002) explains ontology as the theory of being or reality, involving a set of assumptions of what can be taken to really exist. It requires us as researchers to ask ourselves what it is that we see as the very nature and essence of the social world, or in other words what our ontological position or perspective is. Ontology appears to be a very difficult concept because the nature and essence of social things seem so fundamental and obvious that it can be hard to see what there is to conceptualise. It is only once it is recognised that alternative ontological perspectives might tell different stories that as researchers we can begin to see our own ontological view of the world as a position that should be established and understood, rather than an obvious, universal truth that can be taken for granted.

The challenge in designing the fieldwork for this research was to ensure that the voices of the primary school headteachers would be heard. Underpinning the design is what is understood in terms of claims about what represents truth and the contribution that such truth makes to theory. For a study investigating experience, an ontology that sees reality as coming through human experience is necessary. How people create the sense of self and exercise agency within wider structuring processes fits with an ontology within the qualitative approach that recognises and values the personal experience of the nature of truth. Within such a paradigm, truth for one person may be different to truth in the experience of another, but each has valuable insights and, within a group sharing common experience, trends and patterns may be identified.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge construction and epistemological questions should direct the researcher to a consideration of philosophical issues involved in working out exactly what would count as knowledge of social things (Robson, 2002). Epistemological questions are important because they help the researcher to generate knowledge and explanations about the ontological components of the social world.

Positivism, however, is an epistemological position that sees the world as objective, measurable, value free, generalisable and replicable, and there is a logical set of rules and explanations for phenomena researched under this paradigm. Positivism in the use of educational research does not allow for the understanding of the multiplicity and complexity of the 'life world' of individuals. Creswell (2009:7) describes the main argument against positivism, which is that we cannot be positive about our claims of knowledge when studying the behaviour and actions of humans. He also argues it is doubtful if clear cause-effect

relationships that are totally objective and value free can ever be determined, by the fact that researchers are people who carry with them their own values and choose what and how to research.

The knowledge sought in this research is something that the researcher could only study by seeing the world from the perspective of primary school headteachers. This position determines an epistemological stance based on experience and insight, normally researched using qualitative data. I therefore subscribe to the interpretive view, which accepts that the observer makes a difference to the world and that reality is a human construct. This requires an interpretive approach such as that which is described by Cohen et al. (2000:23):

But what of the interpretive researcher? They begin with individuals and set out to understand their interpretation of the world around them. Thus theory becomes a set of meanings which yield insight and understanding of people's behaviour.

As the aim of this research is to describe leaders' experiences and to provide illumination as to how they learn to lead from dealing with challenging situations, the research approach can be said to be broadly phenomenological in nature. The focus here is on identifying the essence or meaning of leadership learning through challenging situations. Such an approach emphasises subjectivity, description, interpretation and agency. It deals with people's perceptions or meanings, attitudes and beliefs, feelings and emotions. In order to address the key questions in this research, it will be necessary to gather and interpret data derived from the perceptions of primary school headteachers. Interpretism is concerned with how meaning is constructed within the complex social world and the aim of working within the interpretism paradigm is to interpret thoughts, ideas and feelings in order develop theories. As an interpretive researcher I disagree with the positivist emphasis on objectivity. In line with

Denscombe (2003:78), my position accepts that the observer makes a difference to the observed and that reality is a human construct:

The task is to present the experiences in a way that is *faithful to the original*. This entails the ability to see things through the eyes of others, to understand things and to provide a description of matters that adequately portrays how the group in question experiences the situation.

Thus the data gathered in this research will be highly individualistic and subjective and influenced by individual experience and insight.

Research strategy

The research strategy used in this study is interpretivist, as this deals with perceptions or meanings and principally with human experiences (Denscombe, 2003). Within the interpretivist paradigm there are a number of different methodological approaches that can be adopted. This study will seek to explore a general theme: the essence of leadership learning. This research approach can be said to be broadly phenomenological in nature, lying predominantly in the qualitative paradigm:

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants' setting, data analyses inductively building from particular to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2009:4).

Qualitative research deals with perceptions, attitudes and experiences that are located in very specific circumstances. However, although findings can only be related to that particular research, trends and patterns across many such studies contribute to the body of knowledge in a paradigm where it is accepted that what constitutes knowledge changes over time. In contrast to positivism where an initial hypothesis is tested in order to produce a theory, my

fieldwork sets out to generate knowledge that is not based upon hypotheses but upon a body of evidence that underpins experience (as set out in the conceptual framework of the study). It is also important to note the value placed within qualitative research upon the distinctive nature of individual experience, which may fall outside the identified patterns and trends, and this has particular relevance to my study in ensuring that the voices of the primary school headteachers in this study are heard.

Implicit in qualitative research, then, is the significant role of the researcher in the production and interpretation of qualitative data. Being involved in education and specifically in the area of educational leadership, I am, as the researcher, inevitably embedded in the situation and, therefore, part of the analysis. Despite being implicitly linked with the analysis, this research will attempt to let those researched speak for themselves by illustrating their views with quotations.

Research methodology

As discussed above, a qualitative approach is considered appropriate for this study because it can enable greater understanding of how leaders learn to lead through challenging situations. The survey approach, through the medium of semi-structured interviews, can be applied to small-scale qualitative research, and it is ideally suited to revealing experienced-based learning. As this research seeks to identify ‘how much of being a leader is learnt from *experience* and which *experiences* have most significance on how leaders learn to lead, the survey approach is the most appropriate.

To answer the research questions in this specific small-scale enquiry, two methods of data collection were considered. These were the use of either focus groups or individual interviews. Although each of these methods could have been effective in relation to this study, there were a number of good reasons for eliminating one of them.

Focus groups

Focus groups are normally small groups of people brought together to explore ideas, attitudes and perceptions about a topic (Denscombe, 2003). Focus groups allow a vast amount of data to be generated in a relatively short time and are a cost-effective method of utilising the focus groups' time well and minimising interruptions to their professional activities. The focus group can be distinguished from other forms of group interviews by the role of the interviewer and the interactions of the group. In group interviews, interviewers are concerned mainly with the nature of their relationships with the members of the group as individuals. In a focus group the role of the interviewer is to achieve an accurate representation of the views of the group as opposed to accounts from the individuals in the group. The interviewer in this instance becomes the 'moderator' (Denscombe, 2003). Instead of being the focal point of interactions, posing the questions and dictating the sequence of talk, as an interviewer does, the good moderator stands back and lets the group talk amongst themselves. In this way the moderator *guides* the group rather than *leads* it.

As the headteachers in this study are all from the same local authority and know each other, the advantage of using a focus group approach would be that such meetings could take place in an informal manner. The headteachers would be able to 'play off' one another and

interactions such as the use of humour, asides and non-verbal clues could consequently be observed.

Focus groups are contrived settings bringing together a specifically chosen sector of the population to discuss a particular given theme or topic where the interaction with the group leads to data and outcomes (Cohen et al., 2000:288).

It might also have been less daunting for participants to respond as a group rather than in individual interviews. However, the interrelatedness of the group and the fact that the questions required the headteachers to divulge both personal and professional issues could prevent the participants from being able to respond candidly and honestly. The headteachers were also being asked to describe challenging situations in their own contexts that could be confidential in nature. This could prove to be extremely problematic in a focus group setting.

As McQueen and Knusson (2002:91) note:

[Very] important, especially if the research is dealing with a sensitive topic, is the thought that must be given to protecting vulnerable members of the group and to dealing with upset or catastrophe.

They also state that:

There is a vast amount of evidence from the field of social psychology to show that people are changed in the company of others; what people say and do, and even perhaps what they think will be affected by the presence of others (McQueen and Knusson, 2002:209).

The issue of gathering and recording the data in, and from, a focus group situation was also considered. Field notes could have been used, but this would have required an additional researcher/note-taker in order to capture all the comments. The confidential nature of the issues being discussed would have made this difficult. A Dictaphone could have been used, but might not have been the most effective way of capturing the individual responses of a

number of people. After consideration by the researcher, the disadvantages of the focus group method far outweighed the advantages.

Semi-structured interviews

Individual face-to-face interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method for this research as they offered a reliable data-gathering method from individuals in an informal and unobtrusive environment, with an assurance of confidentiality. They also seemed the most reasonable method to yield the answers required to the research questions posed in this research.

There are a number of advantages of using individual interviews, in particular, the emphasis on collecting detailed responses face to face and being better placed to revisit questions to seek clarification regarding the basis for answers. Individual interviews also allow participants to discuss their own interpretations of the phenomena under study and make sense of their social world and of each other. In this sense:

the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable (Cohen et al., 2000:267).

For the researcher, it is therefore easier to grasp one person's ideas and interrogate through an interview agenda than trying to balance and question a range of ideas coming from different sources at one time. Denscombe (2003:202) notes the advantages of using interviews:

- *Depth of information* – the data deals with topics in depth
- *Insights* – information is gathered from 'key informants'
- *Equipment* – only simple equipment and conversation are required
- *Flexibility* – adjustments can be made during the interview

- *High response rate* – prearranged and scheduled
- *Validity* – data can be checked for accuracy with informants
- *Therapeutic* – Can be a rewarding experience for the informant

There are, however, some disadvantages to using interviews as a method of research, as outlined by Ribbins (2003:208):

It is possible to misinterpret the views of the interviewees by claiming they have said something when they did not but also by selectively reporting their words to suggest that they have said something they did not intend.

For this research, interviews were semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews rely on the researcher gauging the balance between the openness of the questions and the focus and order of the topics to be explored (Denscombe, 2003). The justification for this approach is that it allowed for some structure, in that the topics and issues were specified in advance, but the sequence and working of the questions could be decided during the course of the interviews. It also allowed some comparison and identification of themes between respondents, whilst still maintaining a fairly conversational and open interview. It must be noted here, however, that this flexibility can also result in substantially different responses, and different emphasis placed on the topics discussed, thus making the comparison of data more challenging.

Interview management and access

Interviews were carried out on a one-to-one basis at the headteacher's place of work. This was partly because of the logistics of arranging interviews with more than one leader in different schools, but also because of the nature of the issues to be discussed. One-to-one interviews create an environment conducive to self-disclosure. Being at their own place of work

provided a 'safe' environment for the headteachers and enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of their 'professional world'. This privilege also allowed the researcher to get a feel and a picture of the surroundings in which the headteachers work day to day. Interviews took place during and after the school day and lasted approximately forty minutes. Most of the interviews progressed smoothly and without interruptions.

The interviews were recorded on a digital Dictaphone and backed up by field notes to outline important contextual factors. It was made clear to participants that all recordings of interviews would be kept securely and not be made available to anyone other than my research supervisors. All data arising from the research was kept in three ways – as hard copy (available to research tutors and examiners); as data files on a computer hard drive; as a back-up on a computer memory stick. The quality and richness of the responses varied between the headteachers depending on the lucidity of the individual and their ability to reflect on the influence of challenging situations on their learning as leaders. However, most of the accounts yielded thoughtful and interesting reflections.

The interview schedule was piloted with two headteachers from the local authority to assess the appropriateness of the interview questions, the meanings attributed to them by respondents and the amount of time needed for each interview. Both leaders were constructive in their comments about the interview questions, as a result of which the researcher revised two questions that needed to be clarified to improve understanding. I also ensured that pre-interview materials clearly indicated what the headteachers needed to consider prior to the interview, as one of the headteachers in the pilot was clearly unprepared for the interview, leading to some vague and unreflective responses.

Probes and prompts

Although the interview format was semi-structured, some additional questions were posed in individual interviews. This was felt to be an appropriate strategy as the research is fundamentally to ‘discover’ something and not merely gather information (Denscombe, 2003). As the researcher I did, however, need to be aware of the possible conflict between teasing out new information through additional questions and doggedly drawing out ideas and perceptions that could possibly align with my own beliefs or suit the purpose of the research. One of the lessons learnt from the pilot interviews was the need to reflect on the possible probes and prompts before consequent interviews as far as possible and use them as guides during the interviews. This prevented overuse of probes and prompts with specific individuals. However, digressions were made in situations where this approach hindered the flow of the interview.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used for this study in that the participants were hand-picked for the purpose of the research. The semi-structured interviews were carried out with eighteen headteachers from a range of primary schools within the local authority. Six headteachers were chosen to fit each of the three categories linked to their length of tenure in headship: early headship (1–3 years), middle headship (3–10 years) and late headship (10+ years) (Appendix iii). A mixture of male and female headteachers were chosen, broadly reflecting the gender distribution of headteachers in primary school education. The sample of headteachers was also selected according to ease of access, as they are all situated in the local authority in which I work. To some extent, therefore, this was a convenience sample, since it comprised headteachers who were easy to contact. Although the sample does not represent the

wider population and is, therefore, 'selective and biased' (Cohen et al., 2000:164), it is still acceptable because the aim is not to generalise findings to the wider population but to offer an insight into how selected individuals learnt to lead, which could then be related to others.

It is important to state that all participants in the research are known to the researcher as colleagues within the local authority. This will be an advantage in that I will have 'insider' knowledge. Hockey (2003:221), in exploring issues when researching peers and familiar settings, suggests 'that which is closest may well be that which is most difficult to see'. His arguments for and against 'insider' research culminate in the conclusion that:

Perhaps the main issue in terms of the insider/outsider dichotomy is which position is most productive for the research process? (Hockey, 2003:220).

The advantages of 'insider knowledge' in this research outweighed the disadvantages in that the researcher was able to draw on the experiences of a range of headteachers in different contexts with varying levels of experience.

Table 3.1, shows how the research questions for this study were translated into the interview questions that made up the main body of the schedule. The literature review for this study has also been used to support the design and content of the questions. Interview questions are provided in Appendix ii.

Table 3.1: Research questions linked to interview questions.

Research Questions	Interview Questions
RQ1: What are the challenging situations faced by headteachers?	Talk about the challenging situation(s) that you have had to face as a headteacher. <i>Headteachers invited to choose one challenging situation to discuss in detail.</i> Why did you choose this one?
RQ2: What determines the strategies headteachers use to deal with challenging situations?	How did you deal with this situation? (<i>Probe</i> What strategies were used?) What supported/guided you during this time?
RQ3: Which coping mechanisms do headteachers exhibit when dealing with challenging situations?	What helped you to cope with the challenge? How did you feel (during/after)? Why do you think that was?
RQ4: What are the effects of challenging situations on the leadership learning experiences of headteachers?	What did you learn from dealing with the challenging situation? What did you learn about yourself and your school during this time? How do you think this learning has helped you deal with other similar situations? How do you think your leadership preparation and development helped you deal with this challenging situation?

The interview schedule with the eighteen headteachers was arranged by contacting them by telephone to agree mutually suitable dates and times. A covering letter was emailed to those who agreed to participate, detailing the purpose of the research. An outline of the interview schedule was also included to give participants an idea of the type of themes that would be covered and to allow themselves to prepare for the interview (Appendix i).

Interviewer effect

Consideration was given to interviewer effect in this study and, in particular, the ‘Hawthorn’ effect – derived from a set of industrial studies – whereby the special attention of an external

observer creates a positive effect on that being studied (Cohen et al., 2000). This is particularly pertinent in this study as my position as a Senior Education Adviser within the authority taking a particular interest in how headteachers learn to lead could prove a threat to the validity of the research. My role within the local authority could be construed as influential and result in headteachers not wishing to discuss the challenging situations they face in their schools. In the event none of the potential problems were encountered and there was no indication that the headteachers held back any information as a result of the reasons stated above.

Permission to continue

A strategy was also adopted at the end of the discussion around each of the set questions of asking the interviewee if they were happy to move on to the next area of questioning, if they had anything else to add and if they felt they had answered the question sufficiently for their needs. In this way, interviewees had an opportunity to reflect on the responses given so far and add any further information that had been omitted.

Ethics

The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data should be considered the norm when conducting research (BERA, 2004) and participants should have an entitlement to privacy, confidentiality and anonymity unless they have specifically waived this right. All of the headteachers were assured of anonymity and privacy from the outset of the research project. It was not my intention for any of the headteachers to be named at any time in the study. Access to the transcripts of individual interviews was offered to the headteachers, but they all declined the offer. Informed consent was obtained from the participants and they were

offered the right to withdraw. Contextual details such as type of school, age and gender of each headteacher interviewed were kept to a minimum to maintain the required confidentiality of the informant. Confidentiality was maintained throughout and the headteachers were made aware that they would not be named or made identifiable in the research.

Ethical issues of confidentiality and the level of personal involvement between the headteachers and myself, as researcher, were also considered. This meant that although I know who provided the information (therefore not anonymous), the connection has not been made public within this thesis. My role within the Local Authority afforded a position which could have been construed as influential. As one of the key principles of ethical research is that 'harm to research participants must be avoided' (BERA, 2004) participants were all made aware of a 'no harm' clause when carrying out the interviews.

Analysing the responses

Once the interview responses had been collected, they were transcribed. Included in the transcriptions were informal field notes. Semi-structured interviews are fluid by their very nature, which could lead to the 'relevant' issues being lost. It was important, therefore, that broad themes and issues that recurred frequently or infrequently were identified in the conversations. Table 3.2, below, which is adapted from Denscombe (2003), summarises the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative analysis.

Table 3.2: Advantages and disadvantages of qualitative analysis

Advantages	Disadvantages
The descriptions and theories are ‘grounded’ in reality, i.e. the analysis has its roots in the conditions of social existence.	Difficult to generalise from the data and therefore may be less representative than quantitative research.
There is a richness and detail to the data that enable a sound analysis of the subtleties of each individual’s life story.	Interpretation is intertwined with the ‘self’ of the researcher. The findings are a creation of the researcher rather than a discovery of fact.
There is a tolerance of ambiguity and contradictions that reflects the social reality of what is being investigated.	There is the possibility of decontextualising the meaning. Providing quotations in the analysis may well take the spoken word out of context and the meaning becomes lost.
There is the possibility of alternative explanations because it draws on the interpretative skills of the researcher rather than the presumption that there is one correct explanation.	There is a danger of oversimplifying the explanation if anomalies are identified and do not ‘fit’ with the themes constructed.

(Adapted from Denscombe, 2003:280–281)

Thematic analysis

Denscombe (2003:292) sees thematic analysis as when ‘the researcher begins to identify relationships between codes or categories of data or becomes aware of patterns of themes within the data’. One might argue that all qualitative studies include some form of thematic analysis through a search for patterns, groups or categories of arising themes. The intention in this research was to gather the perceptions, thoughts and ideas of headteachers when faced with challenging situations and explore arising themes related to leadership learning. Thematic analysis lends itself to a search for relevant arising themes. Additionally, in thematic analysis the researcher moves back and forth from the source material to continually check for theme relevance and arranges the findings to determine significant themes.

Thematic analysis in this thesis offered the researcher opportunities to systematically sift through a rich source of data, synthesise highlighted categories into arising themes and revisit the dataset to confirm findings.

On a practical level I highlighted and referenced the interesting points from each transcript so that themes could be identified in an organised manner. Recurring patterns emerging from this interview data were put into a matrix. This matrix method enabled patterns to emerge and to record evidence of these patterns through selecting appropriate quotations to illustrate these. It also enabled me to see if there was a consensus over certain areas explored. Commonalities were identified and highlighted within each of the themes, and differences were also noted whenever they occurred. In order to indicate strength of feeling and suggest the degree of commonality or difference, I have used the words 'most' (to represent 75 per cent plus), 'majority' (60–74 per cent), 'some' (40–59 per cent) and 'few' (less than 39 per cent) of the eighteen respondents in the analysis. My task in analysing the data was to depict the relevant experiences of the headteachers as faithfully as possible. This enabled themes and relationships in the data to emerge (Appendix iv). Conclusions and theories were then drawn from these. Although not predetermined during the study, the possibility of certain themes arising had been considered prior to the analysis taking place. These themes were then related to theoretical models from the literature review and new ideas interpreted and reflected upon in the findings.

Validity and reliability

External validity refers to the degree to which the research can be generalised to the wider population. As the sample size is small in this research study, the external validity is

problematic if applied to a wider population. The sample is also taken from just one local authority and political and economic factors may have an impact on the way schools are led. Cohen et al. (2000) suggest 'understanding' is a more suitable term than validity in qualitative research, thus highlighting the importance of the meaning the subjects give to the data and the inferences drawn. In this way accounts can only be representations of an individual's reality rather than exact reproductions of reality. Although the research is not generalisable, trends and issues have emerged to inform and answer my research questions and contribute to the ongoing research agenda. I am, therefore, able to show that the relatability of the research is more important due to the outcomes being potentially related to other similar organisations. The issues surrounding leadership training and development are also worthy of note and consideration and are at least useful to learn about for organisations committed to advancing and developing their leaders.

Limitations of the research

Questions could be raised about the 'objectivity' of conclusions for this research as there may be an eagerness on the part of the headteachers to please, given that the researcher is a local authority colleague. Denscombe (2003) outlines this problem and warns of interviewees fulfilling the perceived expectations of the researcher and how the quality of data could suffer as a result:

Research on interviewing has demonstrated fairly conclusively that people respond differently depending on how they perceive the person asking the questions. In particular the sex, age and ethnic origins of the interviewer have a bearing on the amount of information people are willing to divulge and their honesty about what they reveal (Denscombe, 2003:184).

Another potential flaw must also be acknowledged in that just one method of data collection was used: semi-structured interviews. Whilst this is not untypical for this kind of research, as

evidenced by research already done in this area (Gronn, 2003; Ribbins, 2003), methodological triangulation could possibly have given additional evidence and confirmation of how leaders learn to lead through dealing with challenging situations.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research design including methodology, methods and management of this study. I have sought to put into context the ontological, epistemological and methodological position of this research. I have also explained the research strategy, method used and some of the issues of such an approach. I have justified the extent of reliability and validity of this research and the ethical dilemmas inherent in this qualitative study. I have also explained how the data will be analysed and have acknowledged the limitations of the study. Finally, in explaining how the data was analysed, and acknowledging the study's limitations, this chapter has aimed to show the potential of the chosen methodology for research into the leadership learning experiences of primary school headteachers. Thus, with the researchers identity, values and beliefs clearly stated and justified, this thesis now moves to present the findings of the research in the following chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the eighteen interviews undertaken with primary school headteachers. The findings are broken down into themes relating to the research questions and are supported by tables and quotations from the headteachers. Each theme is briefly summarised and the section concludes with a summary of the key findings and identification of the emerging issues that will be discussed in the next chapter. The quotations offered in this chapter were chosen by the researcher as ‘best examples’ of the ideas expressed, issues shared and comments made by the respondents in order to put their points across at the time of the interviews. The themes emanating from the responses to the interview questions related to each of the four research questions provided below:

Research question one: What are the challenging situations faced by headteachers?

Themes: Relationships, Trust.

Research question two: What determines the strategies headteachers use to deal with challenging situations?

Theme: Values.

Research question three: Which coping mechanisms do headteachers exhibit when dealing with challenging situations?

Theme: Emotional resilience.

Research question four: What are the effects of challenging situations on the leadership learning experiences of headteachers?

Themes: Learning through experience, Learning through reflection, Formal learning and development.

The transcripts of tapes of respondents' interviews in both phases of the research were simply labelled and all respondent quotations given in this chapter are labelled as shown in Table 4.1.

I have also included reference to the length of tenure of each headteacher as a guide. The respondents are listed in chronological order of interviews.

Table 4.1: Transcript labels.

Headteacher respondents	Length of tenure
Headteacher 1	Late Headship
Headteacher 2	Late Headship
Headteacher 3	Late Headship
Headteacher 4	Early Headship
Headteacher 5	Early Headship
Headteacher 6	Late Headship
Headteacher 7	Late Headship
Headteacher 8	Middle Headship
Headteacher 9	Middle Headship
Headteacher 10	Late Headship
Headteacher 11	Middle Headship
Headteacher 12	Early Headship
Headteacher 13	Middle Headship
Headteacher 14	Early Headship
Headteacher 15	Early Headship
Headteacher 16	Middle Headship
Headteacher 17	Middle Headship
Headteacher 18	Early Headship

Early headship (0–3 years); middle headship (3–10 years) and late headship (10+ years)

Comparative findings linked to the length of service of the headteachers in this study are tentatively drawn, although they are not the focus of this study. Recurring themes from an

analysis of the interview transcripts that informed this study are available in Appendix iv. This labelling technique was used by the researcher to refer back to the data and also to determine the number of responses made on any particular issue under arising themes and the relevance in terms of frequency. The labelling technique has also been used in this thesis to fulfil the confidentiality clause agreed with the respondents at the start of the research.

Challenging situations

When asked to talk about the challenging situations that they have had to face as a headteacher, the subject matter is the same in all eighteen interviews. All of the headteachers, without exception, identify relationship tensions between adults as their challenging situation. Some headteachers describe challenging situations arising from relatively low-level personnel problems such as inappropriate remarks or undermining behaviour that had to be challenged:

The SLT were bickering and behaving negatively towards the deputy. They were undermining me and the initiatives I was trying to bring in (Headteacher 15).

I knew that I was going to have to remain really calm as if they were a group of naughty children in my class, ignore the bad behaviour (Headteacher 18).

Two describe more serious personnel issues such as those related to teacher competency:

She had class behaviour problems, needed a lot of support. Worst lesson I have ever seen. We started informally. Wrote her a letter saying why I was concerned and how much support she was going to need. Then moved to formal (Headteacher 3).

And misconduct:

He wasn't managing behaviour, and then the incident ... we had to suspend him (Headteacher 8).

One headteacher describes her shock at a being confronted by an angry member of staff:

I thought at one point she was out of control, I don't think she was going to hit me, but she was so upset and with hindsight I thought I haven't protected myself at that situation because she could say anything, I just probably had never seen anybody behave like that in a professional situation, it was a completely new situation (Headteacher 13).

Most of the headteachers describe being challenged by significant groups at the school. Headteacher 4 says: 'My governors have been difficult with heads in the past and they were with me', whilst Headteacher 6 describes the response of the parent body to her appointment as headteacher: 'The parents loved the previous head and I had to work hard to establish myself with them as the new head.' Table 4.2, provides a brief description of the relationship issues outlined by the headteachers when describing their challenging situation. Common to all the headteachers, and irrespective of the length of tenure, is the challenge of dealing with relationships which have, for a myriad of reasons, broken down or been damaged. The term 'stakeholders' is used in this table to describe the children, staff, parents and governors associated with the school.

Table 4.2: Descriptions of challenging situations.

HT	Challenging situation	Stakeholders
1	Parental disquiet about a staffing issue	Parents
2	Staff challenging early decisions of headteacher	Teachers
3	Teacher capability	Teacher
4	Governors critical of the headteacher	Governors
5	New headteacher perceptions versus staff perceptions	Teachers
6	Dealing with challenging parents	Parents
7	Building relationships in a challenging school	Teachers and Governors
8	Grievance procedure	Teacher/Governors
9	Staff challenging early decisions of headteacher	Teacher
10	Grievance procedure	Support staff/Governors
11	New headteacher perceptions versus staff perceptions	Teachers
12	Staff commitment in challenging school	Teachers
13	Challenge from staff member	Teacher
14	Challenge from staff member	Teacher
15	Challenge from staff members	Teachers
16	New headteacher perceptions versus staff perceptions	Teachers
17	New headteacher perceptions versus staff perceptions	Teachers
18	Challenge from staff members	Teachers

The majority of headteachers use negative terms such as ‘stressful’ ‘damaging’ and ‘destructive’ when describing their challenging situations, although some acknowledge the beneficial force of the challenge in providing impetus for change. ‘It was painful but it needed to happen’, says Headteacher 3. In some instances the level of challenge is described by the headteachers as excessive, leading to rushed, irrational decision-making and the use of reactive rather than proactive coping procedures:

I could have been more tactful because it sent out waves that the school was destabilising (Headteacher 11).

The level of challenge and the point where it may become excessive varies according to the degree of control that headteachers feel they have over the situation within which they are participating. The interview data suggests that the greater the feeling of control, the less stressful the situation. Headteacher 1 relates her experience of calling a large group of parents together to discuss a school issue:

Biggest mistake. I invited them in. It was a very hostile meeting. I was out of my depth and I came out feeling wrung through (Headteacher 1).

Headteacher 17, on the other hand, describes her very systematic approach to dealing with ‘difficult’ staff members:

I singled out four of them and one day I went and got each one from the classroom and put the deputy to cover their class and took them to my room and said I understand that you have issues with my leadership, can you please tell me what they are so we can sort it out. I was very positive but I was very cross that this was going on. I was being very open with everybody; I was very comfortable doing it. I knew it was going to be challenging but I couldn’t work out what was going on. I actually felt comfortable doing it and afterwards (Headteacher 17).

Whilst providing useful background information, the specific details and outcomes of the challenging situations are not the focus of this thesis. The purpose of this study is to consider

the leadership learning of headteachers as a result of dealing with challenging situations. What is being considered is the effect of the challenging situation on the headteacher and its resultant impact on his or her leadership. Another important feature of this approach is that the challenging situation may be considered a result of the headteachers' perception of that mismatch rather than any objective assessment of it, and what must be borne in mind when considering the challenging situations is that in each of the headteachers' descriptions there is an allusion to the tension which arises between the individual's perception of the situation as it should be and the situation as it is. It is also necessary to ensure, for the purposes of this study, that although the headteachers are treated as individuals, they are seen as acting within contexts. The part of the school systems in which they are working is therefore subject to the challenges specifically related to those systems. The headteachers in this study describe a range of challenging situations that make demands on their time, expertise, energies and emotions. What the interviews reveal is that a challenging situation for one person may not be a challenging situation for another or indeed for the same person on a different day. What is important is if the headteacher considers the situation to be challenging for them in their situation at that time.

As stated previously the theme of 'relationships' features very predominantly in the interview findings and these are explored further in the next section. The headteachers describe very frankly how social and emotional interactions often intensify during a time of challenge and how relationships get damaged when conflicts erupt and territories are challenged. 'Managing people – think that is the biggest challenge, people and relationships', says Headteacher 17, echoing the voices of many of his colleagues.

Relationships

Responses from the headteachers illustrate the reason why ‘relationships’ features strongly as a foreground theme in this study and the influence of this recurring theme on the leadership learning experiences of headteachers is clearly drawn from the findings.

In the interviews the headteachers acknowledge that schools are ‘evolving and dynamic institutions’ (Headteacher 18) and admit that they often feel swamped by the uncertainty and ambiguity of dealing with a ‘range of people all wanting different things from you’ (Headteacher 9). This is further illustrated in the comments of one headteacher:

If people want to come and talk to me I’m more than happy to do that. I think it is important that people can do that. This person, she’s one thing and sometimes another, don’t know what you are going to get with her (Headteacher 14).

Schools are described as ‘profoundly complex organisations’ driven by ‘unpredictable relationships’ (Headteacher 13). Headteachers cite the demands placed on them as leaders working in a ‘constantly changing environment’ and they overwhelmingly stress the importance of relationship-based leadership as part of the leadership learning process:

I think I learned that you really have to have strong people skills. You have to be a fantastic role model. I learned to work with people who would work with me in a difficult situation. Find out who your allies are and work with them from the most humble midday supervisor to a newly appointed teacher. Looking at my organisation and finding people who will work with me. It’s about the people you know (Headteacher 2).

Learning was to make sure that you paved the way and that you do this person to person (Headteacher 1).

I know that the whole key to this school is to build relationships. I have to engage with them and they have to see what I want to do and we do it together (Headteacher 18).

At the heart of their understanding of relationships is the fundamental acceptance by headteachers that every leadership action will generate ‘an emotional response’ from the people with whom they work (Headteacher 14). The challenge described by some of the headteachers is that the same action may well generate contradictory responses within an apparently homogenous group. The responses of individuals are expressed through behaviour that is derived from subjective perceptions – which are, in the words of Headteacher 14, ‘unpredictable’ and sometimes ‘confrontational’. A number of headteachers describe their experiences of being faced with direct challenge and confrontation from colleagues:

They were critical, openly underhand. Non-co-operation, they would do their job but no extra. They punished me as they felt I had damaged their school (Headteacher 2).

Staff refusing to do things, lots of talking in groups behind closed doors and in huddles, conversation stopping when you walk through the door (Headteacher 16).

The tensions of developing relationships when new to the school either as a new headteacher or in their second headship are referred to by many of the headteachers. Headteacher 5 is very clear about her immediate actions when taking up a new headship appointment when she states ‘I needed to get everyone on board as soon as possible’.

Another headteacher, in her second headship, describes building relationships as one of her recurring leadership challenges:

It’s all about the people ... all of my challenging situations have been about the people. Here and in my old school. Not the children, the adults (Headteacher 17).

Headteachers describe forming relationships as a period of initial impression-making culminating in a stage in which both parties had worked out a relatively stable set of mutual expectations:

The staff initially were very compliant, they weren't adverse, but I did say when I first came that I would watch and wait, that was my remit, I would watch to see how the school runs. From that they had their own security, I wasn't going to come in and look and see what you did, what was good and what was bad. I did say that if there were things that I thought would have to change immediately, I would (Headteacher 11).

A common experience described by the headteachers, irrespective of length of service, is that of 'isolation' or 'aloneness', especially when there is a breakdown in a relationship at the school. One headteacher talks about the 'loneliness of leadership', saying very simply 'we all work in a bubble' (Headteacher 4). For headteachers new to a school there was a change in the immediate reference group, so that relationships with former close peers and colleagues had to be recast. One headteacher, reflecting on her experience on taking up a second headship, explains the isolation of being alone at the top when facing challenging situations:

I think you take credit for successes as a headteacher but you are also accountable if there are failures, be aware of responsibility. Headship can be a high status role when you are not in headship but when you are in it, it's a huge responsibility, the buck stops with you. Important not to be seen to blame everybody else (Headteacher 2).

Another headteacher is very clear about the change in her relationship with colleagues on becoming a headteacher, stating quite simply: 'I don't socialise with the staff now' (Headteacher 11).

Two headteachers with forty years experience between them describe the diversity of challenging situations and confirm the experiences of their colleagues in describing the predominance of relationship tensions in challenging situations:

I think that the challenge with people is the same wherever you go. It's different kinds of challenges. In our school it's about developing relationships with and between the staff ... but in another school it may be more informed stroppy parents, e.g. my child has only got a 3c and should have had 3b, what are you doing about it? I think that those parental challenges need another skill. I think I would prefer the challenges in my own school (Headteacher 6).

It's the people – the parents who are tough – you know you are never going to please them, changes in staff, dealing with staff, or governors. I have been fortunate with the governors but it's people things – I felt like I had to establish relationships and get them right because they are the things; you can sort out building works, health and safety, and go on courses for finance, but they are not going to cause you heartache and they are not really going to affect the children, but relationships with staff do (Headteacher 1).

Three of the headteachers very candidly describe their misguided and sometimes unsuccessful attempts to deal with challenging situations and build relationships:

I did it completely wrong. Getting it wrong on two fronts. It was not possible to find a perfect solution part way through the year. Trying to find a perfect solution and trying to sell it to parents who were quite hostile (Headteacher 1).

I think it was for a while that I'd got it wrong, they were expecting everything to be moved on and I was being judged by governors as having to make things improve. I think from my point of view it was a case [where] I was worrying about forming relationships with all the elements (Headteacher 11).

I was incredibly naive about dealing with people, in some situations, a bit too open, a bit too trustingly optimistic and I did come out feeling bruised (Headteacher 12).

Overwhelmingly the headteachers speak of the need to respect people at all levels. Even in times of challenge the headteachers demonstrate an astute awareness of people, how they work and how to get the best out of their staff. Typical phrases are 'really getting the staff to work together' (Headteacher 7), 'I really listened to people' (Headteacher 9), 'staff will respect you if you treat them well' (Headteacher 11), 'keep morale high, celebrate every step' (Headteacher 8).

The significance of the relationships with professional colleagues beyond the school is also highlighted by the headteachers when they are asked who supported and guided them professionally during the challenging situation. This was the question that produced the most diverse answers. Relationships with others are seen by some headteachers as significant

because they are very influential in developing and helping the leaders to progress. One headteacher describes the support of her local authority adviser:

Picked up the phone to her, she was in here regularly, I always felt that I could ring her up and say I'm in trouble, I don't know what I'm doing. I had a really honest relationship with her and that was fantastic. It was a very professional relationship but she became a very good friend (Headteacher 7).

Some people, beyond the school, were sought out by the headteachers because of their ability to support and motivate:

I asked for help. The most help I got really was a circle of new heads. They are all as good as each other. I remember very early on ringing one up and he said, just come down. I didn't tell him what I was experiencing; he told me what his first year was like. I thought oh ok it's not just me (Headteacher 18).

Typical comments include: 'had my friends and colleagues, they were stalwart through it' (Headteacher 2). One headteacher describes her relationship with the headteacher in a nearby school: 'I could pop in and have an in-depth conversation about what is important to me' (Headteacher 12). A few headteachers talk about people collectively as being of significant support either through clusters – 'being able to form relationships with people I knew I could talk to about an issue was fantastic' (Headteacher 1) – or the influence of people around them: 'I shared it with my cluster group and they made me feel better' (Headteacher 12).

Conversely, some headteachers describe the negative influence of other colleagues when they are trying to deal with challenging situations and how this impacts on their sense of isolation:

I was appointed a mentor and I did call the mentor and asked for help. She couldn't understand it and I didn't speak to her again. I did feel very isolated. I hadn't attended any heads meetings due to the fact that I was too busy to leave the building because of the things that were exploding daily. There was no support mechanism (Headteacher 15).

In one instance it enables a headteacher to witness how things should *not* be done and he describes his role as mentor to a new headteacher:

As soon as I could support somebody else, I thought about the importance of having support mechanisms and a safety net to fall into, because if you fall out with the person supporting you there is no one there to pick it up, and then it would be very easy to think I can't do that (Headteacher 14).

What is of real significance in this study, and will be explored in detail in Chapter Five, is that when the headteachers are asked who supported them during their challenging situations, very few of them identify colleagues within their own school. Some of the challenging situations were confidential and therefore precluded discussions with others within the school. For others the support and advice of others who might be facing similar situations was what the headteachers sought more than the support of their immediate colleagues. This is honestly explained by Headteacher 14:

Talking to other heads gives you space to reflect, which is useful, and you realise that actually all schools have similar rubbish going on.

An interesting outcome of the findings is the sense that most of the headteachers feel that they are 'solely responsible' for dealing with challenging situations. One talks about the fact that 'the buck stops with me' (Headteacher 4) and another states 'I am the head and it is up to me to sort this mess out' (Headteacher 2). This is a surprising outcome at a time when one considers the general desire to move towards more distributed leadership in schools, including flatter structures and greater emphasis on teamwork. The headteachers describe their collaborative approach to leadership and their desire for 'shared leadership' at their school and yet a significant number admit to feeling accountable for all the challenges that occur in schools.

The headteachers describe how building and securing relationships in their school context is crucial to the development of trust. Trust features very strongly in the analysis of the interview transcripts of the headteachers and it is further explored below.

Trust

The breakdown of the interview findings with the eighteen primary school headteachers shows that the most frequently and commonly mentioned condition for promoting effective relationships in schools is trust (Appendix 1). Trust is cited by the headteachers as the critical factor in securing effective relationships and is consistently identified as a key driver in co-operative working within and across schools. Trust is also identified by the headteachers as a significant tool for creating the congenial atmosphere needed to promote good working relations among staff:

You learn that headship is about trusting people, holding the community together and making good decisions for the children (Headteacher 2).

I said, 'My school is for your children, it's not for you, it's for your children, for me to give them the best I possibly can within the resources that I've got. Do you trust the school to provide the best of opportunities for your child?' (Headteacher 11).

Perhaps it's about dealing with people as a manager and whether or not they trust you as a leader (Headteacher 14).

The headteachers assert to being committed to developing trust in their schools but identify a number of challenging situations where trust has been breached or broken. This breakdown of trust is described by Headteacher 16 as a 'major blocker' to the development of successful relationships. The most frequent examples of this loss of trust are when the headteachers perceive that the staff, parents or governors have lost confidence in their ability to lead. This

negative perception of competence or ‘distrust’ is often heightened during challenging situations when the ability of the headteacher to lead is put into question.

The headteachers describe how the staff sometime question their ability to lead, especially when situations at the school become ‘challenging and vulnerable’. One headteacher describes how her staff lost confidence in her after she made a very poor leadership appointment:

Loss of trust by the staff in me. I lost their co-operation. I lost the deputy head fourteen weeks into the job, after the Ofsted letter, he disappeared, never to return. I lost all credibility with the staff and governors as I had pushed the appointment through. There had been an internal candidate who I didn’t want (Headteacher 2).

Another describes the negative staff perceptions of her leadership on taking up her headship and attempting a staff restructure:

I think the perception was I wasn’t leading it well because I was a completely different leader to the previous Head and they wanted somebody to tell them what to do every step of the way (Headteacher 9).

When describing how they felt during the challenging situations, the headteachers share a similar sense of hurt and rejection when the people around them seem to display a lack of trust in their ability to lead and they talk about feeling ‘stabbed in the back’ and ‘very bruised’ by members of their staff. Whilst the emergence of trust, or indeed mistrust, is not a direct inquiry in the interview questions, the majority of the headteachers talk about trust and observe the development of trust in the adult relationships in their schools as a consequence of their own practices. This is put succinctly by Headteacher 18, who states: ‘In order to survive I knew I had do everything I could to get their trust.’ The headteachers assert that their actions play a key role in developing and sustaining trust and some of them describe their challenging

situations as when ‘the staff think that I am not doing what I said I would do’ (Headteacher 11).

The headteachers generally agree that building trust is a ‘slow process’ and suggest that the consistent match between their words and their strategies and behaviours is the key to developing and supporting this trust. The majority of the headteachers also acknowledge their own vulnerabilities in gaining the trust of stakeholders. Interestingly two of the headteachers use banking metaphors to describe how they engender the trust of those around them and ‘build a reputation’ (Headteacher 2). They talk about accumulating ‘credits’ when they make the right decisions so that they ‘have savings in the bank to draw upon if things happen’ (Headteacher 11).

All of the headteachers talk about the breakdown of trust as a *reason* for the challenging situations or the *result of* the challenging situations. Notably only two of the headteachers provide examples of challenging situations which culminate in them losing trust in other people. Headteacher 12 describes the compliance of her staff but laments their lack of commitment, leading to her loss of trust in them:

I came out assuming everybody put into it what I put into it and it was quite an eye-opener to have a staff meeting and agree that you thought you knew what you were doing and finding that actually they are very good at saying something at a staff meeting, but not doing it (Headteacher 12).

Headteacher 5 describes the tensions between herself and the governors at the school, explaining that she is very saddened by the fact that she has ‘learnt not to immediately trust people’.

Summary

Challenging situations are described by the headteachers in this study in a variety of ways, but their distinguishing feature is that they are all linked to relationships and stand out as turning points in some way. The primary consideration for the headteachers when describing challenging situations is where relationships have broken down and trust has been eroded. The headteachers focus on the challenge of building relationships with the adults in their school and identify situations when there are tensions within these relationships. All of the headteachers say that building relationships within their school is a fundamental aspect of their leadership role, but many describe it as a complex and challenging process. The headteachers are very clear in their belief that it is crucial to people to trust each other in school settings and acknowledge the need for trust not to be broken. Whilst they were not specifically asked if, and how, trust was restored after the challenging situation, there was a strong sense throughout the interviews that they felt a personal and professional responsibility to make sure that relationships among all stakeholders were restored. The description of the challenging situations and reflection on them provides the headteachers and the researcher with an opportunity to look in greater depth at the strategies and coping mechanisms used to deal with these challenges.

Strategies for dealing with challenging situations

At the heart of the interview findings are the tensions and dilemmas involved in managing the relationships in the school. These are the relationship or ‘people issues’ that the headteachers all describe as their most challenging situations. This section now focuses on the strategies the headteachers use to deal with challenging situations in response to the interview questions related to research question two: *What determines the strategies headteachers use to deal with challenging situations?*

Values

When asked about the strategies they use to deal with challenging situations, the headteachers are very explicit in describing the specific actions they took. When probed further about what it was that helped them decide on which strategies to use, the most frequent responses are linked to what the headteachers describe as their ‘core values’. Indeed the headteachers’ descriptions of the challenging situation are often underpinned by the value judgements made and the significance the headteachers attach to an event. The headteachers describe how they ‘bring a set of values to a situation’ that shape their interpretation of the situation and the significance they attach to it. If the values in the school are not aligned with those involved, then the challenging situations described by the headteachers arise through misunderstandings and misinterpretation. Without exception the headteachers talk about their values as being based on the need to help pupils achieve their best, academically and personally. This was a very powerful, recurring message in the interviews:

One of things that was said to me early on was that if you put those children first, you will not go far wrong. Stands you in good stead. You’re challenging staff because of the children (Headteacher 5).

Headteachers describe how they refer to their values as a guide to making the right decisions. This is clearly illustrated by one headteacher who describes it simply as ‘doing the right thing by the children’. One headteacher echoes the voices of her colleagues when she says:

Ultimately, a lot of the things that we do within this school, that’s because we want to make it the best possible provision for our children and that’s the only driving motivation (Headteacher 11).

Another puts it more stridently:

I was very clear about what needed to be done and I knew it was right – as long as I kept that, I could put up with the other rubbish (Headteacher 18).

The headteachers explain that their ability to ‘do the right thing’ is based on their ‘value systems’ or what they think is ‘important’ for their school. They refer to their ‘core values’ as the key sources of guidance during challenging situations and the way in which a challenging situation is approached is built on their espoused values. Surprisingly only one headteacher talks about his ‘moral purpose’ as the driver for his actions in dealing with his challenging situation, using the term interchangeably with what he describes as his ‘value system’ (Headteacher 15). All of the headteachers are explicit in the use of terms such as ‘values’, ‘value systems’ and ‘value sets’ to identify what helped them decide on the strategies to use in challenging situations. The headteachers show an openness and willingness to articulate their values and their deliberate attention to this terminology is striking:

I just knew I didn’t have any support at all and I didn’t want to battle them, I needed them on side. I stuck by my values (Headteacher 18).

I was absolutely sure that what I did was right. Your decision was made on the needs of the children and the whole school. The values you hold dear for your school (Headteacher 3).

work with your values, don't badmouth people, it's easy to be negative. My professional integrity and values and principles, stick to them, slow burn process, will get there gradually (Headteacher 7).

and what I said to them was that I need to analyse that I am dealing with this right. To explore my own value system, then make some decisions (Headteacher 4).

The exploration of values is invariably in the forefront of their decisions when dealing with challenging situations and the strategies for action are taken as result of exploring and articulating these values. One headteacher states, ' I was having to really think about what was important to me in terms of my values, my vision, and I hadn't really done that before, because when you are challenged, you really have to think about it' (Headteacher 17). The challenging situations described by the headteachers often arise as a direct result of values being tested or questioned. Examples of this are given by two of the headteachers who describe their actions in dealing with a challenging situation that was at odds with what they believe to be right for the children and the school:

Behaviour issues that hadn't been dealt with appropriately, for example children were being sent home and I said actually that's exclusion, when I found out, and there were several children who had not been appropriately supported (Headteacher 17).

The teaching and the learning. The fact there was a general acceptance. I still can't understand how children could be taught from behind a desk. The books were just dreadful (Headteacher 16).

In these situations there is a conflict in the values that individuals in the school have brought to the situation that has created the challenge. Despite this obvious conflict, the headteachers explain that situations such as these need to be dealt with empathetically. A number of the headteachers describe the challenge of clarifying their expectations and establishing their values with all members of the school community. The majority of the headteachers describe how they use a range of strategies and actions to ensure that all school members make a

commitment to their proposed values and describe their frustration if members of staff are unwilling to commit to their espoused values. The course of action taken when dealing with this is seen as stressful by the headteachers, who describe themselves as more likely to be in a 'high-adrenaline' state, 'ready for action' when they are challenged about their values (Headteacher 2).

They didn't believe it was necessary and I had to make it explicit. It was the right thing to do (Headteacher 15).

Summary

The findings from this study show that headteachers use their values and an understanding of them to sustain their motivation and to stay focused when dealing with challenging situations in their busy day-to-day school lives. The findings also show that the strategies used by the headteachers to resolve a particular challenge may not always be the same. Sometimes the headteachers describe different resolutions to the same challenge. These are defined as much by the context as the individuals involved. What is strongly represented, however, is the importance of values in determining how headteachers deal with challenging situations and the influence of values in providing a rationale for the strategies they use. The strategies described by the headteachers in the interviews reflect the powerful influence of those values:

- Holding, articulating and arguing for professionally defensible educational values
- Ensuring that their value system is preserved in time of challenge and change
- Identifying the correct values for the context
- Modelling the values of the school – i.e. is what you say, what you do?
- Dealing with value conflicts
- Unwavering focus on the needs of the pupils during challenging situations
- Remedying any mismatch between practices and values
- Recognising and appreciating complex relationships.

Coping mechanisms for dealing with challenging situations

Having considered what determines the strategies headteachers use to deal with challenging situations, this section now explores the way in which headteachers cope with their challenges through research question three: *Which coping mechanisms do headteachers exhibit when dealing with challenging situations?*

Emotional resilience

When the headteachers are asked to consider the coping mechanisms they use to help them to deal with challenging situations, a recurring theme throughout the interviews is that of emotional resilience. In previous chapters of this study emotional resilience is described as ‘the capacity to withstand and renew oneself in the light of life stressors, thrive and make meaning from the challenge’ (Flin, 1996:8). In other words it describes the ability of leaders to stay focused even amid profound change and uncertainty, to survive the challenge and to learn from it. This ‘emotional resilience’ is captured very succinctly in an interview with one headteacher:

I am strong, I compartmentalise my life. School is school; home is home. Resilient. Learn from it and move on (Headteacher 16).

The interview findings illustrate the relationship between the emotional resilience of the headteachers and their ability (i.e. the mechanisms they use) to cope with challenging situations:

What I learnt was it is really important to have that public face, be positive, no good being mopey and miserable and grumpy with people. We had a difficult year with ... it was tough, so the importance of celebrating every little step, with the children in assembly, success leads to success. Having confidence in your own ability is what I learnt, being strong and confident and going for it (Headteacher 12).

I'm quite a calm person anyway. The more angry, the more stressed I get in a professional situation, the calmer I get. I was very organised as a schoolgirl, and I've had difficulties and problems before, but never get intimidated by things, I just think, got to sort this out (Headteacher 13).

The headteachers describe themselves as 'emotionally strong', asserting to having 'bouncebackability' and the ability to 'not let them (*the staff*) know that they had really got to me' (Headteacher 15). A significant number of the headteachers in the sample regard the challenging situations they face as learning opportunities and part of their 'growth as a leader'. Some feel that their emotional resilience had been strengthened as a result of dealing with the challenging situation:

My leadership has grown through that. Yes, I learnt an awful lot from it, but I wouldn't want to go through that again (Headteacher 3).

You get tougher, shoulders get broader, don't take things as personally. I don't think I would get bruised by it now or be as devastated (Headteacher 2).

Professional role-modelling and emotional self-control are central to many of the interviews. Headteachers describe clearly the need to demonstrate a positive, confident, professional demeanour which sometimes requires hiding their emotional self. The headteachers talk about not wanting to convey to others an aura of weakness and inability to cope with the situation. This, they feel, might affect the way in which their colleagues, governors and parents view their ability to lead and manage the school. Two headteachers talk about the tension of not being able to discuss the challenging situation with anyone due to its confidential nature. This, they both admit, took its toll emotionally:

You can't share it with anyone else; you are on your own. I found this really upsetting (Headteacher 3).

The other staff started to ask questions, why is he having a TA all the time. I never announced it to anybody. That was very hard but I had to protect him (Headteacher 10).

Some of the headteachers describe their emotional state during the challenging situation as experiencing feeling 'stressed'. This they relate to an inability to cope with an ever-increasing pressure from certain situations, and in some instances feeling a failure:

There were times when I could have easily driven past the school and not gone in (Headteacher 17).

Emotionally I was angry and upset. Never felt such stress. I thought, I can't get through this (Headteacher 4).

Most show a fierce determination and resilience in the face of adversity: 'I didn't try to hide away. I acted confidently, I stayed high profile' (Headteacher 2). The need to retain that inner centre of calm against the external pressures is a recurring coping mechanism throughout the interviews. Headteacher 18 explains how she had to guard against her own judgemental instincts and manage her own internal anger at the situation in order to preserve external calm and so manage the situation in an 'even-handed' and 'calm' way. This is not, however, the case for all of the headteachers interviewed. Two of the heads describe how 'damaged' they still feel from dealing with their challenging situations. One headteacher expresses relief that she 'survived' the challenging situation, but admits that she is 'still very bruised' (Headteacher 4), whilst another describes a more recent challenge as 'always there, always on my mind' (Headteacher 14).

This initial analysis suggests that the coping mechanisms displayed by the headteachers when dealing with challenging situations vary according to their emotional resilience. There are those headteachers who refer to the way they dealt with their challenging situation using

combative phrases such as ‘I’m a fighter’ (Headteacher 2) or ‘I am bloody minded – I knew I would get there eventually’ (Headteacher 11). These phrases signify resilience and a tendency to oppose rather than conform, sometimes challenging the people with whom there is a relationship problem. Others adopt coping mechanisms which suggest an emotional resilience that is more conciliatory, whereby they seek to find an alternative to a situation, even when this might mean extra work or cause difficulties for themselves:

I don’t like confrontation; I’m not comfortable with that (Headteacher 14).

You don’t have to be horrible and nasty and controlling to get people to do what you want and always be prepared not to ask somebody to do something that you wouldn’t be prepared to do yourself (Headteacher 7).

However, all of the headteachers admit to being emotionally compromised in the face of adversity; some even talk about having to exercise ‘emotional resilience’ and accept what is happening, proactively seeking out improved outcomes. The coping strategy used by one headteacher is to ‘never lose faith’ in the confidence that she would prevail in the long run. She describes how she manages to keep her life in perspective and accept the reality of her current situation, whilst at the same time dealing with the situations:

I thought, are we actually going to get anywhere? Also, understanding that, yes, some people are always unhappy, always angry, and you work through it; it might take a long time, have to remember it might take a long time. But it is doable. You have to remember at the back of your mind that it’s all about the children’s learning and some of the discussions we were having were nothing to do with the children’s learning. I came to that headship with learning being my priority (Headteacher 9).

There is a general acceptance by the headteachers that part and parcel of being a leader entails them experiencing resistance from members of the school community and most of them are able to see ‘people’ difficulties as ‘moments in time’ through which they will adapt and learn. The headteachers use words like ‘frustrated’, ‘upset’ and ‘cross’ to describe their feelings

during the challenging situations and admit in some cases to being ‘wounded’ and ‘hurt’. During the interview process three of the headteachers became visibly upset when reflecting on their challenging situations. Despite the fact that these headteachers explained that their challenges had been successfully resolved, the emotional impact of the incident could still be felt. For one headteacher this was many years after it had occurred and she was surprised at her tears when recalling the event. What is notable is that whilst a couple of the headteachers talk about walking away from the situation or trying to evade dealing with the challenge, none of them does. On the contrary, they all describe the actions they take to prevent further repercussions:

I don’t think I ever thought we would fail actually. I’ve had days when, at the end of the day, when I threw my handbag across the room, but I’m quite a stubborn person so it was more I’m going to do this. That notion knowing, just that gut feeling, like when you buy a house, and I got quite a lot of staff on board, some weren’t on board but there were more positives than negatives (Headteacher 7).

Whilst not explicitly stated, it appears that the underlying philosophy of the majority of the headteachers is the simple acceptance that in leadership the relationships with people are going to have both good times and bad, as well as smooth and rough periods. The ‘reality of the situation’, as described by Headteacher 16, is that ‘not everything others do or say at any given time is always going to suit me’ and she echoes the voices of many others when she says she needs ‘to develop a bit of hardiness’ as a leader to help her address the challenges she faces.

Summary

The interview transcripts provide clear evidence of the link between the coping mechanisms described by the headteachers in this study and their emotional resilience. To summarise, the headteachers describe how they: (i) remain calm under pressure and manage their emotions,

(ii) display resilience in recovering quickly from adversity and setbacks (iii) acknowledge conflicts and act to resolve them, (iv) rationalise the challenge and (v) keep things in perspective.

What is evident from the above findings is that emotions matter in the school leadership role. All of the respondents acknowledged the importance of emotional resilience and emotional control in relation to and management of both of themselves and others. The findings clearly show that the emotional responses to the challenging situation, and the possible tensions which may arise from them, depend on the emotional resilience of each of the headteachers. This resilience often determines the subsequent actions the headteacher takes in dealing with the challenging situation.

Leadership learning

This section explores the findings related to research question four: *What are the effects of challenging situations on the leadership learning experiences of headteachers?* The responses to questions posed by the researcher in relation to leadership learning from challenging situations can be divided into three broad themes. The first is concerned with the experiential learning of the headteachers in relation to the challenging situation they face. This is described by a number of the headteachers as ‘on the job’ learning. The second section relates to the use of reflection by the headteachers to guide and support their learning from challenging situations. Finally this section explores the headteachers’ views on the formal learning opportunities afforded to them and the impact of these on their ability to deal with challenging situations.

Learning through experience

Analysis of the interview transcripts shows that the majority of the headteachers broadly agree that the experiences they have when dealing with challenging situations are instrumental to their learning as leaders. Learning from challenging situations is seen by many of the headteachers as a ‘painful’ but important process because it enables them to acquire whatever is needed to ‘survive and learn’ (Headteacher 6) regardless of the challenging circumstances:

Not an experience I would recommend to anybody, but I used it as an opportunity to learn. I’d rather not have had the experiences, but they taught me a lot about people. I think experience helps, makes you more confident (Headteacher 3).

Learning through the struggle. I think that’s what I did do. There are other ways of learning. I had a very cohesive deputy headship, more straightforward, very safe and secure, then went from something comfortable to something that was very uncomfortable, I felt out of my control and scared. New feeling. Sharpens your senses, and heightens awareness for everything. Adrenaline-fuelled leadership (Headteacher 2).

The general consensus from the headteachers is that most leadership learning is gained 'through the experiences you have' (Headteacher 12). One respondent says that her experience as Acting Headteacher had given her the 'knowledge needed to do the job properly and that this was the only way I really learnt how to lead' (Headteacher 11) and typical responses are that there is 'nothing formal that really prepared you for the challenge of headship' (Headteacher 6).

When describing their learning experiences as headteachers, the respondents sometimes compare their 'on the job' learning as headteachers to the learning they experienced as deputy headteachers. The transition from deputy headship to headship is described by the respondents as a 'huge learning curve' and many talk about the 'burden' of headship' as having sole responsibility for the decision-making at the school and for solving problems. The process of moving from deputy headship to headship is often characterised by 'shock' where there is considerable difference between the job as expected and as experienced. More than half of the headteachers new to post were surprised to find, for example, that what they had learnt as deputy headteachers and the strategies they used, were not always transferable to headship. This is evident in the interviews of those in both their first and second headships.

All my experience at my two other schools, there was always someone within the school to support me. I have had lots of challenging situations, but I wasn't the last shot, because I was a deputy or a leader. Most of my challenging situations have been as a head because of the notion of being on your own and the buck stops with you. In the past, any challenges, I had an amazing headteacher who showed me how to get through situations. So my real challenges are very recent, because I think I have had to bear responsibility for them (Headteacher 5).

A number of headteachers talk about the assumption by others in the school that when they gained headship, they would automatically be a leader and they describe the difference between making decisions as a deputy headteacher and as a headteacher:

My deputyship was really independent of the headteacher and I had a lot of freedom to develop as a leader and that was really interesting. I missed the freedom when I came here. I came here and nobody liked me and nobody wanted to be in my team and nobody wanted to do what I wanted to do. I was not liked and actively disliked (Headteacher 18).

The three headteachers interviewed who were in their second headship generally felt better prepared than those who had just moved from deputy headship to headship and talk about having ‘some awareness’ of what lay ahead in terms of change and challenge, but describe how in some instances it was ‘very different’ to what they had anticipated. One describes her move from one headship to another as ‘unexpectedly tough’ (Headteacher 17).

Many of the headteachers had been through the NPQH programme, but felt that it was ‘idealised’ and ‘paper-driven’ (Headteacher 18) and that learning was ‘done in isolation’ (Headteacher 9). There was general agreement amongst the headteachers that experiential learning better prepared them to deal with challenging situations and that formal learning was not easily transferable to real life situations:

I can’t think of any courses that would prepare you for it. The challenging situation I mean. Courses that allow you to discuss, reflect are great. I think it’s about the experiences I have had along the way. A wealth of experiences – learning on the job (Headteacher 1).

I don’t think anything prepares you for it. I think it’s learning on the job and having the support systems around you (Headteacher 16).

There are certain things that you learn in leadership that can only happen as a result of being in school, on the job. It might be good to have training on body language, and dealing with people, but I don’t think anything could have prepared me for that (Headteacher 4).

A number of the headteachers describe the learning from ‘real life’ situations as the most ‘powerful’ because it is ‘live’ and ‘tough’ (Headteacher 2). They describe this learning as an ongoing process of growth and discovery about the job and about their leadership role.

When the headteachers are asked what they learnt about themselves as leaders through dealing with challenging situations, the responses fall into two categories. The first type of learning they describe is confirmatory, in that it confirms what they already knew about themselves:

I learnt that I am tough, stubborn and proud and my own pride is my enemy – I wanted Headship for a long time and then to get it and had it all fall about my ears, I couldn’t live with that, I had to build it back up. Professional and personal pride, resilience, toughness. Integrity, when things are bad, keep going (Headteacher 8).

The second type of learning is described by one of the headteachers as ‘revelatory’ in that the leaders find out things about themselves that they did not already know.

I’ve learnt that I am stronger than I thought. One of the things that worried me was wouldn’t I have the big ideas. I knew I could do the leadership and the management. But where do heads get their big ideas? But it is there, it is within me. I think it comes from my experiences within school and probably within life (Headteacher 5).

That despite all my ability to have a vision as a leader, I lacked supreme confidence in dealing with people. As a person in certain ways I can appear very confident and I am very sure of what I am saying. Take that away and I lack a lot of the skills needed (Headteacher 18).

The headteachers all acknowledge the impact of ‘on the job’ learning on their leadership style and the leadership strategies they use. At times the strategies themselves became the content of their learning in that, as a result of the challenging situation, the headteachers learn new strategies and tactics or refine existing ones. The ability to transfer learning from one challenging situation to another provoked an interesting pattern of responses from the

respondents. When asked what they would do if faced with a similar challenging situation, a number of the headteachers talk about the notion of experience leading to familiarity in dealing with similar situations, explaining that they ‘become less devastating because you have seen them before’ (Headteacher 2). Nearly all of the headteachers lament the fact that they did not deal with the challenging situation more quickly and they describe future strategies they would use for challenging situations as ‘dealing with it sooner’ and ‘making sure I was on to it straight away’ (Headteacher 14). This was common across the range of respondents, with one very experienced headteacher stating very simply: ‘I learnt that I would have dealt with it earlier and probably done it differently’ (Headteacher 3).

Learning through reflection

Although they were not guided to do so, all of the headteachers in the study chose to identify and discuss a challenging situation which had happened in the past, reflecting on and considering their learning *after* the challenging situation, rather than identifying and discussing a current tension. Depending on the length of tenure of the headteacher, some of the challenging situations were more recent than others. Responses show that the timeframe for the challenging situations could be divided into two broad categories: challenges that occurred in the last five years and those which occurred between five and ten years ago.

The researcher asked questions that required the headteachers to review and analyse their actions, thinking and, most importantly, their learning from challenging situations. Interestingly, for a number of the headteachers this is the first time that they have been asked to consider the *learning* brought about by their involvement in the challenging situations and how this has influenced their leadership:

Now I look back at the challenges, I came to the school and didn't like the perception of myself and that has been a learning curve to me. A real knock-back at the time though (Headteacher 11).

I can look back at it now and I can pick out the learning from it. It's a very sharp learning curve. It's easier to see the learning now ... not sure I saw it at the time (Headteacher 2).

A number of the responses suggest that when headteachers learn from a challenging experience, they do so in a haphazard way triggered by the challenges and difficulties they face. In some instances the learning is seen by the headteacher as almost intuitive and accidental – learning that was not originally anticipated:

One of the things I really learned through the process, almost by accident, was about the way I behave as headteacher. And I probably learned to reflect more before I dive in (Headteacher 18).

It made me reflect on my leadership. That is important. The notion of uncomfortableness means that you are learning, although you might not know this at the time (Headteacher 5).

Learning in this instance is mediated through reflection on the challenge, which allows the headteachers to interpret events and decide on future actions. In each of the interviews the headteachers were given help to reflect on their learning from the challenge through the questions posed by the researcher. The interview questions help the headteachers identify and explore the factors and processes influencing their learning through dealing with the challenging situation. The data generated by the interviews shows that leaders learn from challenging situations, but that their reflection on their learning from challenging situations is mostly intuitive, unstructured and undirected. There is insufficient evidence in the interview findings to indicate the way in which the learning from challenging situations could be enhanced through structured reflection. There is, however, a clear sense in the transcripts that

the headteachers regret not dealing with the challenging situation sooner. The use of reflection to aid learning, whether it be structured or not, is a very important consideration of this study and will be further developed in later chapters.

Formal learning and development

When the headteachers were asked about the formal learning opportunities they had had for their current role and the way these may have helped them to deal with challenging situations, the responses were very mixed. Most of the headteachers have, however, very few positive things to say about the training and development they received for their current role. One headteacher is very clear about the learning he had gained from studying for the NPQH.

NPQH did not prepare me at all, unfortunately. I hoped it had but it was pitched at such a diverse group of people, it could not possibly suit the needs of the group (Headteacher 15).

The way in which formal programmes connect with the work context is generally criticised and a number of the headteachers allude to the difficulty in applying generic leadership concepts to specific settings and specific situations. One headteacher suggests that formal learning is ‘too abstract’ (Headteacher 18) whilst another says that ‘you can’t really remember the theory when you have an angry parent screaming at you’ (Headteacher 10).

When asked about the formal training and development that might have been beneficial when dealing with challenging situations, there was no real consensus of opinion from the respondents. Some headteachers talked about the importance of learning about interpersonal leadership: ‘I think more of the interpersonal stuff would have been very useful’ (Headteacher 10). Conversely, another very adamantly states that training sessions on

interpersonal leadership are ‘fruitless’ as ‘either you have interpersonal skills or you haven’t’ (Headteacher 8). Although there was no real consensus on any general leadership programmes, some headteachers felt they would have liked some training in specific issues, particularly dealing with staff competency and grievance procedures. One describes this as a ‘minefield’ whereby ‘if you don’t follow procedure, you’ve had it’ (Headteacher 8).

The headteachers do, however, place a high value on the formal opportunities for interaction with their colleague headteachers as a means of enhancing their professional development in their headship role and receiving support for dealing with challenging situations. This is valued by those in early, middle and late headship. The respondents describe, very positively, the informal and formal learning that happens through the networks and links they make with other headteachers. Headteacher 8 suggests that this is because ‘you can share each other’s ups and downs’. Almost all of the headteachers interviewed volunteer this as one of the most valuable forms of professional development. They cite practical examples such as sharing ideas and information, but also describe interacting with colleagues to find solutions to problems and challenging situations.

The lack of consensus about the type of formal training needed to equip leaders to deal with challenging situations is reflected well in the following interview extracts:

A model would be that somebody wishing to be a head has to go and shadow somebody else, has to go and live in their shoes and take on responsibility. Have practical experience, working alongside a headteacher, that type of thing, rather than actually learning about things through a lecture (Headteacher 11).

I don’t know. I did an MA in primary school leadership and there was a module on change and how to deal with difficult situations. More of that sort of stuff (Headteacher 3).

I would definitely streamline NPQH but put in the support, as in there's a programme you have to attend and I think possibly you would have to initially focus on staffing and standards, finance (Headteacher 16).

Surprisingly only four of the headteachers talked about being part of a coaching system, which they describe as very useful. All of them had engaged a coach in a relationship concerned not simply with educational issues but also matters of values, vision and work-life balance. One was keen to stress that her relationship with her coach was not the same as in mentoring, which tended to be more concerned with identification of immediate situational strengths and weaknesses and the provision of ongoing feedback, advice and support from a more experienced practitioner. Rather it was on a deeper, more emotional level, providing an opportunity for guided reflection:

It gives you time to talk clearly about you. It's not always comfortable. The notion of uncomfortableness means that you are reflecting (Headteacher 5).

Interestingly these four headteachers are in the early stages of headship and what is evident through the interviews is that the newer headteachers differ from their more experienced counterparts in valuing coaching as their preferred mode of learning.

Summary

The responses to questions surrounding how leaders learn to lead centred around three main areas. The first was the learning that the headteachers all acknowledge that they gained from the experience of dealing with a challenging situation. However, the findings suggest that this learning is often unplanned and in some cases overlooked either because it is taken for granted or not recognised as learning by the headteachers. The second was the learning the headteachers gained from reflecting on the challenge with the researcher. For the majority of the headteachers the interviews for this study provided them with the opportunity to reflect on

their learning for the first time, suggesting that structured reflection on challenging situations is not generally employed. The third area of learning was that which the headteachers may have gained through formal leadership and development programmes and the way in which these may have prepared them to deal with their challenging situations. Responses are mixed, but few put this side of their learning in a positive light with most of the headteachers indicating that their formal learning did not help prepare them to deal with challenging situations.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings of the eighteen interviews with primary school headteachers and Appendix iv gives a detailed breakdown of the themes that have emerged. This chapter has focused on the challenges described by the leaders, the strategies and coping mechanisms they use when dealing with challenging situations and how headteachers learn to lead from the challenging situations they experience. It has also sought to explore relationships, trust, values and emotional resilience as common themes from the findings, which will be taken forward for discussion in the light of texts used earlier in the study.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This part of the thesis provides an analysis and discussion of the findings identified in the preceding chapter in relation to the four research questions for this study. Each research question is addressed in turn with the intention of responding to the substantive, theoretical and methodological issues identified in the literature review and methodology chapters. By doing so, I hope to provide evidence of the new knowledge gained through addressing the research questions and to outline how this research can contribute to the effective development of primary school headteachers.

Challenging situations

***Research question one:** What are the challenging situations faced by headteachers?*

Educational writers (Webb and Vulliamy, 1996; Barrett-Baxendale and Burton, 2009) describe educational challenges in terms of the pressure of the continual deluge of documentation and paperwork that arrives on the desks of headteachers. This ‘top down’ control from external sources and the high levels of accountability faced by headteachers is described as unremitting and highly challenging for current headteachers. For the purpose of this study external challenges are the ‘imposed’ changes from bodies such as the Department of Education (DfE), the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the local authority, whilst internal challenges are described as a complex mixture of school-based issues such as the level of staff competence, the context of the school and the challenges the headteachers face as they try to establish a vision or school ethos. Interestingly the external educational challenges outlined in the research are not reflected in the challenging situations described by

the headteachers in this study. None of the challenging situations described by the headteachers refer explicitly to the pressures of external local and government-driven accountabilities, which is a surprising outcome given the high number of initiatives in schools and the very public levels of accountability demanded through these external sources.

In this study the challenges described by the headteachers are expressed as internal challenges linked to the people associated with the organisation. The headteachers do, however, acknowledge the complexity of their role in managing external accountabilities whilst also having responsibility for managing the people inside their organisation, reflecting the intensification of the headteacher role as identified by Bottery (2004) and Thompson (2009). Whilst the headteachers do not explicitly refer to the pressure of external educational reforms, some of their responses indicate a strong link between the internal 'relationship' challenges they experience and external directives and pressure to improve performance from the local authority, the DfE or Ofsted. There is common ground here with the findings of Webb and Vulliamy (1996), who suggest that a dominant challenge for school leaders is the expectation that they are transformational leaders, thus working with and through the people in the organisation, whilst at the same time responding to the rigid system expectations and accountability measures.

In line with much of the recent educational literature on school leadership (Earley and Weindling, 2004; Fidler and Atton, 2004; PwC, 2007; Glatter, 2008), the responses of the headteachers show that they consider leadership to be complex, multi-layered and ever changing. The leaders in this study agree that, regardless of how they interpret the work of a headteacher, they need to be responsive to the different needs, expectations and contextual

conditions of their community. In paying attention to the contextual nature of their challenging situation, the headteachers are displaying the 'contingent' style of leadership identified by Leithwood et al. (1999). The complexity of the challenges the headteachers describe reflect diverse and often competing school contexts. The power of context largely dictates the leadership approach the headteachers in this study take when dealing with challenging situations. For the majority of the headteachers this was highly contingent upon the nature of the problem or issue facing them. The correlation between challenging situations and leadership practice also sits well with the work of Leithwood et al. (2006) and Mander (2008), when they emphasise the importance of understanding context in developing successful leaders:

Much has been written about the high degree of sensitivity successful leaders bring to the contexts in which they work. Some would go so far as to claim that context is everything (Leithwood et al., 2006:8).

The analysis of the interviews shows that the headteachers accept that a key part of being a leader is not only being able to deal with challenging situations but also 'to make tough decisions' (Headteacher 7) and the interviews reveal the ability and willingness of the headteachers to cope with these 'tough' decisions and their consequences. Conflict and challenge are seen as an inevitable part of headship and, without exception, the headteachers describe their challenging situations as having a significant influence on their leadership practice. This is very well illustrated in the following examples. For one headteacher, dealing with staff negativity and inappropriate behaviour ensured she herself consistently modelled professional and fair interactions with others. Another found herself on the receiving end of parental disquiet about the quality of teaching and learning at her school and this influenced her need to rigorously monitor standards and to demonstrate added value for the children in the school. In accordance with Tripp's (1993) view, such examples become critical to those

individuals, because not only are they memorable, but also because they have a significant impact on leadership practices. The resolution of the challenging situation is important to the headteachers but is not the primary focus of this study. What is significant is the power of the challenge to influence the strategies and coping mechanisms used by the headteachers as well as influence their leadership learning.

A number of the early headteachers found that challenges occurred when their desire to move forward was at odds with school community members' perceptions and expectations of the role of the headteacher. Sometimes the challenges arose as a result of historical expectations from staff based on the leadership behaviour and performance of the previous headteacher. This accords with the literature on the leadership challenge experiences of headteachers who are new to a school (Earley and Weindling, 2004; Hobson and Brown, 2003) and is strongly represented in the findings. One headteacher describes how the staff 'loved the old head' and found her style very different. Another is very clear about the staff perception of her leadership, which was that she was not leading well and she was too young and inexperienced to be a headteacher. In accordance with Hobson and Brown (2003), some of the headteachers found themselves doubting their belief in and capacity for leadership once they faced these types of challenges from staff. Contrary to the findings reported by Daresh and Male (2000), the headteachers in early headship report that there was no 'settling in' period when they first became headteachers, emphasising that they were expected to go in, deal with challenges and make strategic decisions from day one. One of the early headteachers describes the pressure she felt when one of her staff expected her to carry out a staff reorganisation in her first week. There are significant implications here for the way in which new headteachers are prepared for their leadership role and the shift from partial responsibility as a deputy

headteacher and full responsibility as a headteacher. The implications for this are discussed later in this chapter and carried forward to the contribution and recommendations in Chapter Six.

The desire to be respected immediately whilst establishing a friendly relationship with members of staff was reported to be an issue for the headteachers new to a school in their first or second headship, although, in correspondence with Hobson and Brown (2003), this was found to be less of an issue where the new headteacher had been promoted from within. Many of the headteachers describe promotion to headship as marking an important and often challenging shift from being 'the person of promise' to being the 'person exercising formal responsibility' (Gronn, 2003:179). In the words of one headteacher, 'you are the leader, people look to you straightaway for leadership' (Headteacher 2).

The findings reveal a number of challenging situations which represent a juxtaposition of leadership role expectations as the headteachers tried to meet what, at times, seemed to be competing expectations from staff. As a result of the contradictions that existed between their own and others' expectations of their role, some found themselves living with a paradox, which one described as being expected to lead in an 'authoritarian, top down role' whilst personally believing that 'leadership is about working collaboratively with others' (Headteacher 15). This concurs with the work of Fullan (2002), who states that whilst headteachers are encouraged to adopt collaborative leadership practices, they still remain the 'principal' of the school and therefore its 'focal point'. The findings reveal a contradiction in the way in which the headteachers describe their challenging situations in relation to their leadership styles. Whilst virtually all profess to wanting an open and collaborative style of

leadership, the strategies they use to deal with their challenging situations suggest they take sole responsibility for dealing with them, using terms such as ‘you’re on your own’, ‘the buck stops with you’ and ‘you have to be the problem-solver’. This does not wholly accord with the plethora of literature espousing the value of ‘shared’ or ‘distributed’ leadership (Leithwood et al., 2006; Rhodes and Brundrett, 2006; PwC, 2007; Harris, 2008), which states that the most effective organisations are those where leadership is shared. Indeed Lambert (2002) cannot imagine how complex situations can be managed without shared leadership. Bottery (2004), however, in line with Fullan (2002), places the headteachers firmly in the forefront of decision-making, especially during times of challenge or discord.

Whilst they do not use the same terminology as Gronn (1999:28), the headteachers all agree that the challenging situations they describe act as ‘turning points’ for them in some way, and what makes them challenging, and therefore memorable, is dependent on the way in which they perceive them and interpret their significance. The challenges described are based on relationships with people in the organisation and the critical discussion of these is developed in the next section.

Relationships

The experiences described by the headteachers in this study reflect the socially driven transformational organisations described by Leithwood et al. (1999) and Muijs et al. (2006), who report that the most problematic challenges for headteachers relate to dealing with the people in their organisations. Muijs et al. use the term ‘shared transformational leadership’ to capture the move from the single leader position to working collectively with others and forming effective relationships with staff and stakeholders. The predominant thread

throughout the interviews, as expressed through the leadership challenges described by the headteachers, is that which is related to the establishment and development of positive relationships with others. It is clear from reviewing the headteachers' responses in this study that they appreciate the importance of building positive relationships with their staff and wider school community, indeed many acknowledge 'relationship building' (Headteacher 8) as the most critical factor in their headship.

The headteachers all articulate the importance of transforming the organisation through the people and 'getting everybody on board' (Headteacher 14), concurring with the work of Duignan (2006) who describes 'authentic leaders' as those who promote meaningful relationships. This also sits well with the work of Day (2003:188), who describes headteachers as leaders who 'build relationships with the school community' and who 'model values and practices'. These relationships are described by the headteachers as a means of establishing collaborative cultures, and via them to communicate values and build up influence on staff as a whole. The headteachers acknowledge that a great deal of what makes them successful leaders in their communities is the quality of these relationships. Lambert (2002) also emphasises the importance of close relationships between members of an organisation, stating that the ability to work together with colleagues is crucial if change is to be implemented smoothly. A very recent study on effective leadership (Day et al., 2010:4) confirms the importance of building relationships in schools, stating that successful headteachers 'build collaboration internally and build strong relationships outside the school community'.

Whilst the emphasis on building relationships in school settings might appear to be common sense, a number of the headteachers report that it is easy to underestimate the amount of time and effort that should be spent on building relationships in the face of the many other competing priorities. Headship is described by some of the headteachers as ‘tough’ and ‘lonely’, and the importance of building relationships is something they all say that they need to work at throughout their headship. The headteachers use terms such as ‘collaborating with’ and ‘building teams’ and the majority of them show a strong belief in the importance of involving staff in the decision-making process. They describe the best way of doing this as by promoting what Fullan (2001:12) describes as ‘social cohesion’ and ‘collegiality’. This is in close accordance with West-Burnham’s (2002:2) assertion that educational leadership is not about ‘generic niceness’ but more about how leaders interact with others in order to ensure they are leaders of their own and other’s learning. Whilst acknowledging the need for a collaborative style of leadership, the headteachers do not see their schools as places where nothing was achieved unless everyone collaborated and consented, but one where decisions were driven by the needs of the children. For some of the leaders the decisions that had to be made proved unpopular leading to challenge and conflict in their schools. However, the headteachers rationalise this as being ‘inevitable, if the school is to grow and develop’ (Headteacher 13). The headteachers acknowledge the need to build relationships with diverse people and groups and, like Fullan (2002), agree that building relationships and teams is one of the most difficult skills for educational leaders.

Interestingly what the interviews do not reveal is any differentiation between the relationship challenges described by early, middle and late headteachers. The concerns and worries of headteachers in their first headship mirror those who have been in a leadership position for

many years and a majority of the headteachers admit to feeling overwhelmed by ‘people issues’ whether they be experienced leaders or new to headship. These findings are in contrast to those of Earley and Weindling’s (2004), who suggest that leaders in their second and third headship find leadership ‘easier’. Nor do the findings accord with those of Brighouse and Woods (1999), who suggest that those in middle headship were more likely to face difficult relationship issues than those in early or late headship. Instead the findings would suggest that there is no gentle introduction or reduced responsibilities for those new to the post. Those in early headship had the full gamut of responsibilities, including dealing with complex relationships, thrust upon them right from the beginning and may explain, in part, why the early headteachers admit to feeling ‘overwhelmed at times’ with the work. Gronn (2003:179) agrees, indicating that a ‘honeymoon period’ for leaders is ‘rare’.

Some of the headteachers describe their challenging situations as those which involve a tension between building professional relationships with their staff whilst challenging them to shift their thinking about their role and the nature of teaching and learning. This is clearly seen as a frustrating and problematic dilemma for a number of the headteachers, resulting in a breakdown in relationships and leading to mistrust and resistance between those in the organisation. The headteachers vividly describe the detrimental effects of relationship tensions on the school and the impact this has on school effectiveness. Fullan’s (2002) study agrees, stating that bad relationships and a spread of negative emotions are a step backwards in developing an effective school.

Trust

Research has established strong links between school improvement and trust, claiming that trust in leaders, and from leaders, determines organisational effectiveness and performance (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Bottery, 2004; Day et al., 2010). The headteachers in this study agree that one of the most important aspects of leadership is building a climate of trust and respect amongst staff members and between themselves and their staff. This concurs with an accumulating body of research that states that trust building is the essence of effective, meaningful and co-operative relationships in an organisation (Bottery, 2004; Covey, 2006; Day et al., 2010; Kutsyuruba et al., 2011).

The headteachers broadly agree that building trust in their schools enables them to move forward and make decisions and they describe the need to show staff, parents and students that they are trustworthy and have the interests of all those associated with the school at heart. Likewise they explain that they want to be able to show trust in their staff. Tschannen-Moran (2004) uses the term 'benevolent trust' to describe how headteachers show openness and empathy for their staff and the headteachers also talk about looking for opportunities to work with staff in an 'open and professional' way. The headteachers do, however, explain that some teachers are not comfortable with such processes and, in some cases, see it as a threat to their professionalism, thus leading to challenge between the headteacher and staff. This is an interesting finding in this study in that it highlights how the very process of trying to build trust in schools can, in some cases, lead to its breakdown.

Examples given by the headteachers of the way in which trust is lost can be very clearly linked to the three principal foundations for trust outlined by Bottery (2004:103), which are:

(1) agreement on values; (2) people doing what they say they are going to do; (3) perceptions of competence. Table 5.1, shows how challenging situations undermine the principal foundations outlined by Bottery (2004) leading to an erosion of trust on both sides. Bottery (2004:103) says that where such foundations are undermined, ‘low- trust’ policies tend to follow.

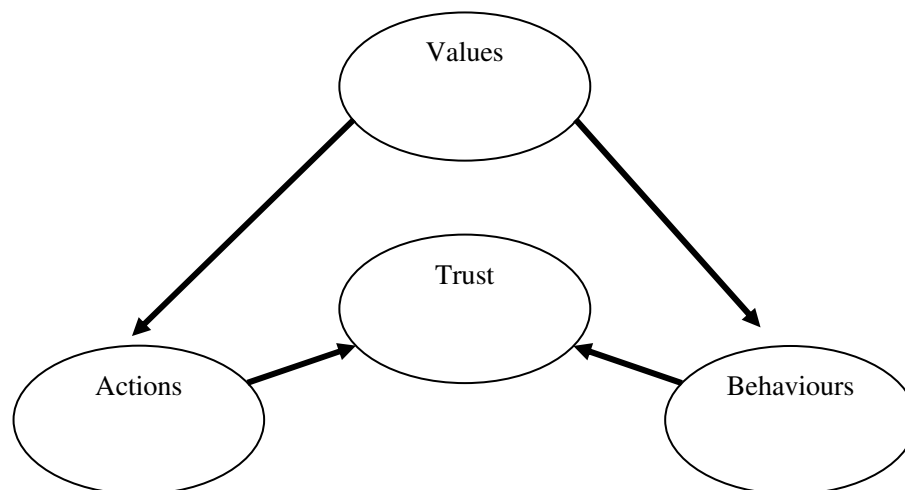
Table 5.1: Challenging situations described by the headteachers linked to Bottery’s Principal Foundations of Trust.

HT	Challenging situation	Principal Foundations for
1	Parental disquiet about a staffing issue	perceptions of competence
2	Staff challenging early decisions of headteacher	perceptions of competence
3	Teacher capability	perceptions of competence
4	Governors critical of the headteacher	perceptions of competence
5	New headteacher perceptions versus staff perceptions	agreement on values
6	Dealing with challenging parents	agreement on values
7	Building relationships in a challenging school	people doing what they say
8	Grievance procedure	perceptions of competence
9	Staff challenging early decisions of headteacher	perceptions of competence
10	Grievance procedure	perceptions of competence
11	New headteacher perceptions versus staff perceptions	agreement on values
12	Staff commitment in a challenging school	agreement on values
13	Challenge from staff member	agreement on values
14	Challenge from staff member	agreement on values
15	Challenge from staff members	agreement on values
16	New headteacher perceptions versus staff perceptions	agreement on values
17	New headteacher perceptions versus staff perceptions	agreement on values
18	Challenge from staff members	perceptions of competence

Evidence of values, competence and integrity (i.e people doing what they say they are going to do) are recurring topics throughout the interviews. Where there is a perception that these are not in place, there is a breakdown of trust between stakeholders at the school resulting in the challenging situations referred to by the headteachers. Many of the headteachers describe how their leadership behaviours and actions are closely watched by members of the school community to ascertain whether or not they are competent, whether their actions and strategies match their values and whether they do what they say they are going to do. The

headteachers use words such as ‘test’ and ‘trial’ to indicate how their ability is measured by others, similar to the ‘litmus test of trust’ described by Brighouse (2002:1). Brighouse explains that this ‘litmus test of trust’ represents the interplay between the behaviours, actions and values of the leader. This is simply illustrated below in the model I have devised (Figure 5.1). This model shows the influence of values on the behaviours and actions of the leaders. The connectedness and interdependency of the three elements is crucial to the development of trusting relationships. The absence of any one of these elements will lead to the breakdown of trust, which can be shown as mistrust or the absence of trust.

Figure 5.1: The litmus test of trust – three requirements of trust.



The interview findings clearly show how quickly trust can be lost during challenging situations and how, once trust is broken, it is problematic to regain. This accords with the work of Bryk and Schneider (2002), who state that ‘low-trust’ schools, where teachers, students and others live and work in cultures of anxiety and fear, get considerably poorer results and no lasting improvement. The headteachers describe how a breakdown of trust can lead to them feeling threatened and use specific examples to show how they face personal

attacks on their competence from members of the community. The ‘deep emotional reactions’ (Bottery, 2004:102) to these encounters is shown in the language the headteachers use to describe these challenging situations. The link between emotion and trust (or violations of trust) is clearly evidenced in the literature (Bryk and Schneider 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Crawford, 2009), strongly reflected in the findings and discussed further in later sections of this chapter.

Covey (2006) and Kutsyruba et al. (2011) say that if there is anything worth investing in up front, it is to demonstrate your trustworthiness, especially in the face of suspicion or mistrust. Low trust, as Covey (2006) says, means low speed (motion slows to a half) and high cost (financially and emotionally), whilst Kutsyruba et al. (2011:82) consider ‘creating, sustaining and fostering trust’ as imperative activities for school leaders. The findings show that the headteachers strongly agree with this need to demonstrate their trustworthiness and they acknowledge that they must work seriously and diligently to build and maintain trust with, and between, all stakeholders.

Whilst the headteachers are unanimous in stressing the need to build trust in their schools, only two are able to provide examples of how to survive when there is mistrust or the absence of trust from members of the school community. Both of the headteachers use banking metaphors to describe how they need to build ‘trust credits’ in order to withstand challenging situations when their competence is being challenged. The building of ‘trust credits’ indicates that sufficient time and commitment is provided for this to happen. Day et al. (2010:7) say that building trust requires ‘high levels of diagnostic skill’ and ‘the possession of high levels of emotional and intellectual qualities’. Bottery (2004) and Kutsyruba et al. (2011) outline a

number of strategies which can be used by leaders to regain trust when it has been broken, but acknowledge that the restoration of trust is a complex process which requires considerable attention, effort and time. There is insufficient evidence in this study to show whether or not headteachers are aware of how to restore trust once it has been broken. This is worthy of consideration in future research.

Summary

What is evident from both the findings and the literature on challenging situations is that schools hold many complex variables and few neat solutions. Challenging situations are seen as part and parcel of headship and do seem to have had a considerable impact on how the headteachers in this study behave as leaders. The preceding analysis has demonstrated that building relationships and trust should be considered as a vital part of leadership development and their constructs used in school improvement efforts. This information is a vital pre-requisite for all aspiring leaders if they are to be fully informed of the complexity of headship.

If we are to begin to understand the relationship between factors that enable individuals to deal with challenging situations, it is important to consider the strategies and coping mechanisms used by headteachers. These are discussed in following sections and are related to research question two and research question three in this study.

Strategies for dealing with challenging situations

Research question two: *What determines the strategies headteachers use to deal with challenging situations?*

There is a growing agreement in literature that the basics of successful leadership can be addressed through a core set of leadership practices which are reflected in *The National Standards for Headteachers* and much is made in the literature of the need for leaders to have ‘a strong moral compass based on a core set of values’ (Fullan, 2002:16). These characteristics are seen as instrumental in being able to deal with challenging situations or in supporting others when dealing with them. The next section discusses the influence of values in determining the strategies the headteachers in this study use when dealing with challenging situations.

Values

The findings for this study show that, when faced with challenging situations, it is the headteachers’ values that help them to deal with conflict, and, in some cases, achieve a successful resolution. The headteachers explain that they deal with challenging situations by doing what they describe as ‘the right things’ and they constantly refer to their values as helping them to make the right choices. This corresponds to the studies by Gold et al. (2003), Duignan (2006) and the very recent study by Day et al. (2010:3), which describe effective headteachers as those who are informed by clear sets of personal and educational values.

The findings in this study illustrate that the strategies used by headteachers to deal with challenging situations are driven by a common set of values rather than management

influences and concerns. Leithwood and Riehl (2005:10) concur, stating that the ‘critical focus of leadership ought to be on the values, beliefs and ethics of leaders themselves’. The headteachers show a commitment to ensuring that standards in their schools constantly improve whilst acknowledging that this can only happen if positive relationships are created and maintained.

This plurality of responses from the headteachers, in respect to the importance of values in educational leadership, reflects a similar polarisation in the literature (Leithwood et al., 1999; Sergiovanni, 2001; Brighouse, 2002; Starratt, 2004; Begley and Stefkovich, 2004). Ever present in the description of the leaders’ actions in dealing with challenging situations is a strong sense of integrity and credibility related to core values. The headteachers display the kinds of qualities identified by the recent research of Day et al. (2010:4), which describes leaders as having ‘a very strong and clear vision and set of values for their school which heavily influenced their actions’. Explicit in all of the interviews is the unrelenting focus of the headteachers on the children in their schools and it is clear from everything said by the headteachers that the leadership values on which their strategies and actions are based are primarily moral and dedicated to the welfare of the pupils. Leithwood et al. (1999) investigated leaders’ behaviours and found that deliberate consideration of values is one of the fundamental processes they use in solving problems. They also found that when leaders are presented with complex problems, values always influence the way they deal with the problem. This is strongly represented in the findings as the headteachers consistently explain that the actions they use when dealing with challenging situations are ‘driven by values’.

When the headteachers describe the way in which they deal with challenging situations they also talk about their vision for the school and invariably their vision is underpinned by a similar set of what many of them describe as their 'core values'. The headteachers see themselves as a source of vision for their schools, working through their relationships with members of the school community. The alignment of others to their vision and values is seen as central and many of the challenges are described as those which occur when others do not align with the vision. The headteachers talk about their vision as that which embodies respect for pupils and staff, and a commitment to the well-being and whole development of the pupil as well as their academic standards, thus mirroring the work of Sergiovanni (2001:202) who stresses the imperative for leaders to 'articulate a vision and build a shared covenant for the school'.

Whilst the headteachers broadly agree that those who work in the school should have space to develop and work with their own educational values, they also explain that they want the staff to be committed to setting and embedding the values they have as headteachers of the school. They explain that when this does not happen, challenging situations can arise. Some of the headteachers found that they were expected to adopt particular routines that were already established and part of the school without questioning the underlying assumptions and values. In these instances the challenging situations occur because of the way in which different sets of values are mediated by members of the school community. It is clear from the headteachers' responses that they believe that different sets of values can exist within one educational organisation, which aligns with the research of Begley and Stefkovich (2004) who describe the leader's role in managing the tensions between competing school values as crucial to their effectiveness. Whilst Day (2003:3) argues that 'successful leaders model

values and practices that are consistent with those of the school', the responses in this study indicate that headteachers sometimes 'inherit' value systems on joining a school which do not wholly accord with their own, sometimes leading to challenge and conflict, and the extent to which similar and dissimilar values can be reconciled is the subject of a number of challenging situations described by the leaders in this study.

The headteachers seek to achieve a balance between responding to the values exhibited by others and consulting and involving them in the school vision whilst still providing a clear direction. They are aware that such involvement might well lead to demands for a bigger say in the direction of the school and consequently challenge their right to make 'final decisions'. They are also aware, in accordance with Leithwood et al. (2006:6), of the benefits of 'building a shared vision'. They do, however, describe situations that involve them establishing a vision and value system for the school without reference to others especially when the challenging situation requires urgent attention and action. Grint (2005) describes these situations as 'critical problems' as they provide very little time for decision-making and action, and are often associated with authoritarian leadership strategies. However, only a minority of the challenging situations described by the headteachers require this approach.

In line with research on educational leadership many of the 'tough choices' made by the headteachers when dealing with challenging situations are those that they have to make when they feel that their values being compromised. Having a clear idea of what is important in their school and what they value makes the decisions easier to make for the headteachers, especially as, without exception, their values are reflected in their duty of care to the children. Such discussion relates to the work of Gold et al. (2003), Begley and Stefkovich (2004) and

Duignan (2004), whose research interprets how values strongly influence school leadership activities. These authors suggest that when school leaders understand how values influence the actions of individuals and organisational systems, they acquire ‘administrative sophistication’. This is similar to ‘personal mastery’ described by Ribbins (2003) when outlining the formation of headteachers.

Summary

What seems to make a difference to the headteachers in this study is not only their persistence in establishing and maintaining their vision and values but also their ability to manage a number of challenges and dilemmas that characterise a school context which is, by its nature, dynamic, complex and unpredictable. The characteristics of these leaders and their ability to be simultaneously people-centred whilst managing challenging situations highlights the complexity of the kinds of values-led leadership exercised by successful headteachers. The findings and literature clearly indicate that values are central to successful leadership. Consequently reflection in, on and upon these must be central to leaders’ training and development. The management and resolution of ‘value tensions’ within schools should also be key components in the learning and development of school leaders.

The headteachers broadly agree with West-Burnham (2002) that leaders should have strong interpersonal skills and must be skilled relationship-builders with diverse groups of people. The fact that all of the headteachers describe relationship tensions as their challenging situations signifies the importance the headteachers attach to this aspect of their leadership. Writers generally agree that emotional intelligence and emotional resilience are a must in educational leadership (Flin, 1996; Goleman, 2005; Beatty, 2008; Crawford, 2007, 2009).

Indeed Goleman (2005:3) states that ‘great leadership works through the emotions’. This theme is explored further in the following section.

Coping mechanisms for dealing with challenging situations

Research question three: Which coping mechanisms do headteachers exhibit when dealing with challenging situations?

It is evident from the challenging situations described by the headteachers that, whilst they may show a strong desire to build and maintain effective relationships in their schools, they are not successful at all times with all people. However, a key characteristic found in all of the headteachers is the determination to try to resolve the challenging situation. For all leaders in this study dealing with a challenging situation is seen as a social and emotional experience as it involves ‘trying to build or mend relationships’ (Headteacher 1). Conflict is described by many of the headteachers as ‘draining’ and ‘painful’ and the vocabulary used by the headteachers suggests the emotions experienced during and after the challenging situations range from upsetting to deeply traumatising. Maslin-Ostrowski (2007) uses terms such as ‘wounding’ and ‘disturbing’ to describe the impact of dealing with challenging situations. The interview transcripts of the headteachers are punctuated with similar vocabulary and expressions, as shown below in Figure 5.2. The vocabulary used by the headteachers can be seen to fit the continuum provided by Mander (2008:8). The number of times the words are repeated throughout the interviews are shown in brackets. The vocabulary used by the headteachers gives an indication of the breadth of emotions they experience when dealing with challenging situations ranging from upset to traumatised, according strongly with the descriptions used by Crawford (2009:78) to describe how headteachers manage ‘potentially toxic emotions’.

Figure 5.2: Vocabulary used to describe the impact of dealing with challenging situations using Mander's (2008) continuum.

Challenging Situations

UPSET	DISTURB	DISTRESS	TRAUMATISE
Upset (4) Stressed (4) Worried (2) Hurt (2) Cross (2) Irritated Isolated Uncomfortable Nervous Tearful Lonely Disappointed Awkward Vulnerable	Out of control (7) Frustrated (4) Exhausted Precarious Undermined Defensive Confused	Shocked (12) Devastated (5) Bruised (3) Damaged Furious Fractured Scared Angry Painful Emotional Guilty	Horrified (3) Wounded (2) Heartache Threatened Nightmare Intimidated

Adapted from Mander (2008:8)

Emotional situations that are difficult to manage are described by the headteachers as deeply distressing, resulting in feelings of isolation as leaders try to establish or re-establish relationships with adults in the school. In some cases the isolation is partly self-imposed by the complexity of the challenges the headteachers face and the confidential nature of the situation. Nearly all of the headteachers describe their sense of loneliness as they try to deal with the challenging situation. This correlates strongly with the work of Earley and Weindling (2004), who state that headteacher isolation can occur throughout headship. They also describe how, when leaders deal with challenge and conflict, they can begin to have significant feelings of self-doubt and anxiety about their performance in their role. The interview findings strongly support these views.

Emotional resilience

Dealing with challenging situations is described by many of the headteachers as intensely emotional work. Beatty (2008) and Crawford (2009) suggest that a paradox of leadership exists in the contradiction between the complex emotions it can invoke and the expectation that strong leaders should not show emotions. The perceived need for the headteachers to manage their emotions during challenge and discord is evident in nearly all of the interviews. As the headteachers grapple with the many challenges they face, they experience a wide range of potentially debilitating emotions, but feel enormous pressure to maintain a calm and rational front. Many of the headteachers explain that they need to respond to challenges in a professional way, putting on a brave face and remaining positive if they are to gain the trust of members of the school community in their ability to do their job properly and resolve the challenging situation. This capacity of the headteachers to portray optimism in all circumstances resonates with the research findings of Duignan (2006), which indicate that if headteachers and teachers are questioned about the same challenging situation, the headteachers are always more positive.

Fullan is particularly interested in the notion of sustaining leaders through the emotional dimension of leadership now and in the future, which he has explored in his change management trilogy (1999, 2001, 2002). In discussing leadership and leadership sustainability in the new millennium, Fullan (2002:22) states:

People have always needed emotional intelligence but in complex times people need it in spades. The culture of change I have been describing is by definition rife with anxiety, stress and ambiguity. It comes as no surprise then that the most effective leaders are not the smartest in an IQ sense but are those with emotional intelligence.

What is not explored in this study is why some headteachers are able to manage and deal with challenging situations and hold themselves and others to account for outcomes while others faced with the same challenges are unable to cope. The headteachers interviewed for this study all deal with their challenging situations and survive. In doing so, these headteachers demonstrate emotional resilience and the ability to manage complex situations. What is also not clear from the research is whether or not emotional intelligence, innate and unchanging, can be learnt. There is confusion in the literature on this subject that has not been clarified through this study. What is clear, however, is that the headteachers in this study have a range of emotional needs and the vulnerability and emotional fragility of headteachers when dealing with challenging situations is laid bare throughout the findings. The need for leadership development that acknowledges and supports the emotional dimension of headship cannot be underestimated and has implications for all leaders, regardless of their experience.

Goleman et al. (2002:21) talk about the importance of ‘resonant leaders’ who, because of their emotional intelligence, develop ‘in sync’ relationships with and among those in the organisation, stating that ‘they form an emotional bond that helps them stay focused even amid profound change and uncertainty’. They say they communicate more easily, solve conflicts, are more friendly, co-operate more often and help others. Evidence of these characteristics is shown in the words and images of the headteachers, and the majority exhibit a high degree of self-control and moral purpose when describing how they dealt with their challenging situations. Succinct messages showing the emotional resilience of the headteachers are evident throughout the interviews: ‘Everyone knows there’s a struggle to be a leader, so get on with it’ (Headteacher 5), ‘You’ve got to do what you’ve got to do’ (Headteacher 3) and ‘I easily bounceback’ (Headteacher 15). Such phrases percolate the

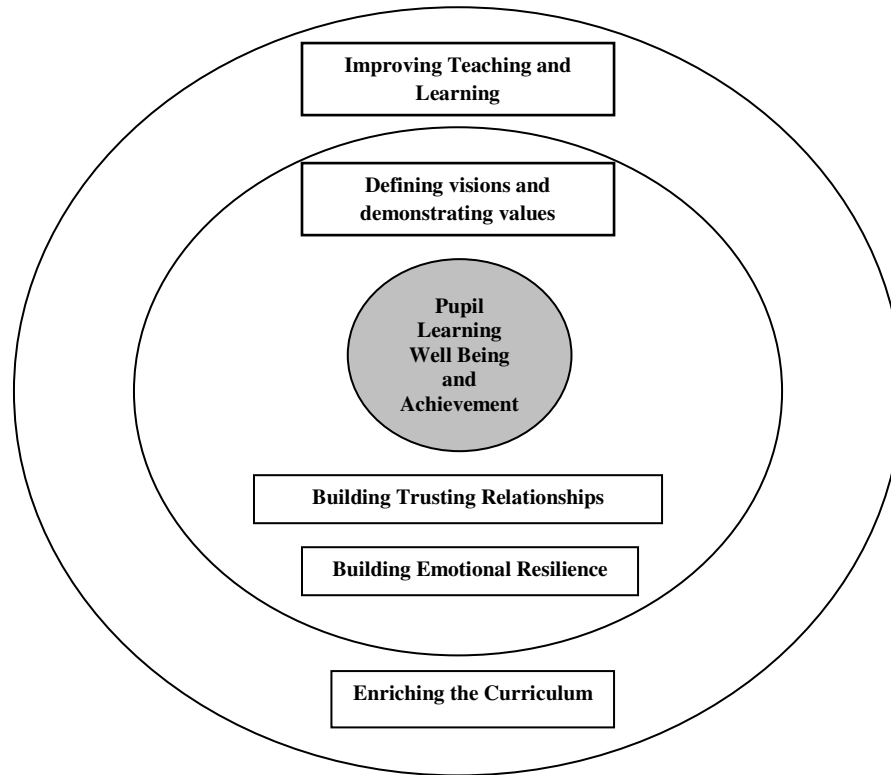
headteachers' responses, suggesting traits of emotional resilience, persistence, determination and a high degree of self-discipline. These characteristics are also reflected in research by Day et al. (2010:7), which suggests that effective leaders 'are persistent in their high expectations of others and are emotionally resilient and optimistic'. The leaders in this study face daunting conditions and are able to push forward against the odds. The headteachers describe themselves as 'resilient', 'determined' and 'tenacious', providing rich illustrations of characteristics that suggest emotional resilience.

Through a process of intellectual analysis and supported reflection in the interviews, the headteachers are, for the most part, able to reframe their perceptions of difficult and upsetting experiences as learning opportunities. A significant number of the headteachers acknowledge the validity of their emotional responses and seek to reframe emotionally charged interactions through processes of intellectual analysis. This strongly accords with the work of Crawford (2007:87), who stresses the importance of headteachers' understanding of the 'part that emotions play in the way they lead'. This process also enables them to continue to move forwards, albeit slowly in some cases, in negotiating the kinds of leadership roles and learning cultures they value. Crawford (2009:78) says that 'wounding' helps leaders 'learn more about themselves as leaders'. Beatty (2008:142) adds weight to this when she concludes that 'emotionally integrative leaders can afford to face their challenges and are far more likely to develop the kind of professional learning communities we are all going to need for a better future'. Just like the headteachers in this study, Goleman et al. (2002:71) describe dealing with challenge as 'high level emotional work', indicating that, 'if leaders fail in this primal task of driving emotions in the right direction, nothing they do will work as well as it could'.

Summary

If there is, as the research indicates, a positive relationship between trust, values, emotional resilience and effective school leadership, it is important to establish how these can be used to sustain and develop current and future leaders. In order to summarise the dimensions and themes that have emerged from the analysis of the findings from research questions two and three, I have adapted the model for successful school leadership provided by Day et al. (2010). In Figure 5 the inner circle illustrates the central focus of leaders' attention, that of pupil learning, well-being and achievement. The inner ring represents the core strategies used by headteachers to ensure successful pupil outcomes. Day et al. suggest that there are two core strategies that are to define vision and values and to build trust. Based on the findings for this study, I propose three core strategies required for successful leadership. First, I agree that leaders need to define their vision, but they also need to demonstrate their values through their relationships with others and through the actions they take. In line with that proposed by Day et al., the second core strategy I have included is for leaders to build trusting relationships with stakeholders. The headteachers in this study demonstrate emotional resilience when dealing with challenging situations. I propose, therefore, that the third core strategy for leaders is the need to build their emotional resilience in order to deal with the complex challenges they face in headship. Day et al. propose a number of actions the leaders take to support these core strategies such as restructuring and redesigning the curriculum. I have condensed these actions into two broad areas, which are to improve teaching and learning and to enrich the curriculum. What is of most importance in Figure 5.3, is the positioning of values, trust and emotional resilience as core strategies within the diagram, confirming the significant impact they have on successful school leadership.

Figure 5.3: The dimensions of successful leadership.



Adapted from Day et al. (2010:4)

Figure 5.3 offers a tentative indication of the dimensions of successful leadership, which not only increases our understanding of how leaders learn to lead but should also be informative to those responsible for developing leaders. This is further explored in Chapter Six. The next section of this chapter moves onto the discussion around leadership learning in relation to the final research question in this study.

Leadership learning

***Research question four:** What are the effects of challenging situations on the leadership learning experiences of headteachers?*

The headteachers in this study all acknowledge that their ability to deal with challenging situations is critical to their success as leaders. Learning from the challenges they describe is also seen as important because it enables the headteachers to develop effective responses to the challenges they face. Whilst much is written about the principles of effective adult learning (Leithwood et al., 2006; Glatter, 2008), the connection between leadership challenges and leadership learning is not explored in as much depth in educational literature. Much of the research explores the responsibility of headteachers to ensure the success of their schools (Bush, 1999; Day et al., 2001, 2010; Allix and Gronn, 2005; Adair, 2006) but less is written about how they deal with complex situations, how they decide what to do and, in terms of reaching a resolution, how they might learn from the challenge.

Research by Mumford (1994) identifies challenging and difficult tasks as the trigger for learning and his research identifies which types of difficult situations influence what leaders learn. It does not, however, indicate *how* leaders learn from these situations. This lack of ‘how’ is very strongly mirrored in the findings, in that the majority of headteachers agree that they have learnt from the challenging situations but very few can articulate what enabled them to learn. Eraut (2010) suggests that this could be because the learning is taken for granted or because of a lack of awareness, by the headteachers, of their own learning. This is an interesting finding if one agrees that the ability to promote learning is itself influenced by the leader’s experience with, and understanding of, learning. One could argue, and this is

evidenced in research, that as schools face continual challenges, a key skill needed by headteachers is the ability to deal with the challenges but also the ability to learn *from* the challenge (Fullan and Miles, 1992, Eraut, 2010). Learning, in this way, becomes fundamental because it enables the headteacher to acquire whatever is needed to grow regardless of the challenging circumstances. Therefore, if headteachers can learn from challenging situations and understand how they have learnt, they can adapt and deal with future challenges.

The challenging situations described by the headteachers create unique learning environments for them and prompted the use of various learning methods forcing the development of new skills and knowledge. The findings indicate that, in some cases, the headteachers' knowledge base is enhanced through dealing with the challenging situations and they become more knowledgeable about personnel issues such as competency and grievance procedures. Some of headteachers also talk about developing and deepening their understanding of teaching and learning pedagogy as a result of trying to improve the performance of underperforming staff in their schools, concurring with Mander's (2008) view that new knowledge can be gained from dealing with challenging situations. Bennis and Thomas (2002) and Mander (2008) claim that when leaders are challenged, they learn about their strengths and abilities and that the more challenging the situation, the more likely the leader is able to move beyond existing skills and knowledge and therefore be required to learn something new. The findings from the study strongly support these views. The following sections discuss the leadership learning of the headteachers through challenging situations under the following subheadings: learning through experience, learning through reflection and formal learning and development.

Learning through experience

Whilst the research is comparatively limited, educational writers broadly agree that adults are more likely to learn from experiences where there is challenge, when what they experience conflicts with what they understand, or when what they undertake creates significant problems (Bennis, 2003; Eraut et al., 2002; Glatter, 2004; Eraut, 2010). In this way the leaders will be more likely to learn because of the difficulties or problems that must be overcome. Consequently the headteachers are learning from what happens, even though, in some instances, it is not what they want to happen. The headteachers' responses support this research as, when questioned, all of them acknowledge the learning gained through dealing with challenging situations. The role and the involvement of the headteachers in dealing with challenging situations is similar to that described by educational writers who see leadership learning as being sustained through 'the interdependent engagement in problem solving and thinking' (West-Burnham, 2005:23) and through the 'resolution of conflict' (Kolb, 1984:273). None of the headteachers in this study go so far as describing 'problems' as their 'friends' (Fullan and Miles, 1992), but they all acknowledge that headship is complex and challenging. One headteacher describes this simply as like undertaking 'a journey' that would have its 'pleasures and pitfalls' (Headteacher 15).

Most of the headteachers differentiate between the learning that occurs in formal settings and that which occurs in school settings, broadly agreeing with the work of Kolb (1984) and Bryman (1992), who state that real learning can only be gained through experience and not through absorbing information presented by trainers. The headteachers agree that leadership learning is at its best when 'in situ' and there is a general consensus that most leadership programmes do not reflect, or easily accommodate, this position.

The headteachers in this study place most importance on learning through experience, but many find it very difficult to articulate what they have actually learnt from dealing with challenge and only identify their learning through supported reflection instigated by the researcher. The emphasis on experiential learning over formal learning could be seen as contradictory here when one considers the responses of the headteachers in relation to their learning from challenging situations. This study clearly shows that what leaders learn from dealing with challenging situations seems not to be adequate on its own, as the learning appears, at times, to be accidental. This strongly accords with the findings of Mumford (1994), Day (2003) and Eraut (2010), who stipulate that learning from informal unplanned experiences, such as challenging situations, needs to be more conscious with time planned for critical reflection and discussion. Glatter (2009:232) states that 'raw experience' is not enough on its own to support leaders' learning and stresses the need for leaders to be supported in structuring and analysing their experiences in order to learn from them. Duignan (2004) and Glatter (2009), on the other hand, suggest a combination of formal training alongside more in-depth bespoke leadership programmes to support leadership learning. They also suggest coaching as a means of supporting leadership learning from challenging situations. The value of coaching in addressing the learning needs of headteachers is evident in much of the recent literature on educational leadership (Hallinger and Kamontip, 2005; West-Burnham, 2010; McKinsey and Company, 2010; Day et al., 2010). Interestingly only four of the headteachers in this study, all of whom are in early headship, describe the significance of their leadership coaches in supporting them through challenging situations.

Learning through reflection

The literature highlights that when challenges in the workplace foster learning by leaders, reflection contributes to the learning (Kolb, 1984; Mumford, 1994; Day, 2003; Glatter, 2008; Eraut, 2010). The ways that leaders use reflection is not clear, however, and what research does not address is whether reflection is triggered by the challenge or what form of reflection leaders might use during and after the challenge. The headteachers in this study all agree that reflection is an important aspect of their growth as leaders as well as in the development of their professional effectiveness. Throughout the interview process, headteachers' responses are peppered with phrases such as 'I remember', 'I am thinking of a time when', 'I thought to myself' and 'in hindsight'. They talk about the importance of revisiting issues at a later time, and of tying up loose ends, and nearly all of them lament the fact that they did not deal with the challenging situation sooner. The headteachers elaborate on specific examples of things they felt they had done well, and on mistakes they made when dealing with the challenging situation.

It is clear from reviewing the responses of the headteachers that a number of them see the interview as providing them with the opportunity to reflect on the challenging situations they describe. This supports and enables them to think about how they dealt with the challenging situation and what they would do if faced with a similar situation in the future. In some instances the headteachers suggest that they would make different and 'better' decisions and use different strategies the next time they were faced with a challenging situation. What the interviews strongly illuminate is that by reflecting on the challenging situation, whether this be through conscious or unconscious reflection, many of the headteachers learnt something that might not otherwise have been acquired. This finding emphasises the importance of

reflection in supporting headteachers' learning, this in close accordance with Day's (2003) view that leaders' learning is constructed through reflection and that learning occurs because the learner reflects on the activity.

The fact that all of the headteachers reflected *after* the action is no surprise when one considers the research in this area. There have been a number of critiques about the notion of reflection *in* action, which, it is claimed, is impossible to carry out in practice because there is insufficient time at a conscious level (Eraut et al., 2002). Evidence from the analysis of the interviews suggests that headteachers face several difficulties that limit their learning during challenging experiences. The findings show that their attention during challenging situations is directed to the solution of the problem and their learning from this is treated as separate and not something that can be accomplished simultaneously. Further, the headteachers do not seem to consciously take into consideration how they might learn from experience or better take advantage of their experiences in order to learn. The problems in pursuing reflective practices in headship have been well documented in research (Day, 2003; Eraut et al., 2002). It would appear, therefore, that in the 'hurly-burly' of educational leadership the headteachers give significant time to the learning of others whilst at the same time neglecting their own learning.

Whilst it is argued that reflection is a necessary condition for learning, there are few studies that examine the relationship between reflection and headteacher effectiveness. The findings and the literature agree that processes that enable deliberative reflection are the exception rather than the norm, despite the fact that research shows that if headteachers are to become,

and remain, effective, they need to nurture their learning and critical thinking through reflection (Fullan and Miles, 1992; Eraut et al., 2002).

Formal learning and development

The majority of the headteachers accept that the challenging situations they describe are unlikely to be resolved through the application of formal leadership programmes and there is broad agreement that the ‘most useful’ leadership learning was that which could only be learnt ‘on the job’ (Headteacher 6). Fullan (2002:457) agrees, asserting that:

Learning in the setting where you work or learning in context is the learning with the greatest pay-off because it is more specific (literally applied to the situation) and because it is social (thereby developing shared and collective knowledge and commitments).

A number of leaders do acknowledge impact from their formal learning opportunities but these are in the minority. The lack of importance attributed to formal professional development methods by the headteachers is strongly reflected in the research on the leadership learning of school leaders (Gronn, 2003; Duignan, 2004; Rhodes and Brundrett, 2006). The headteachers describe their learning in relation to practical school experiences rather than that which can be gained through books and courses. Theoretical research is not seen as particularly favourable by the interviewees, unless it enables useful interaction with colleagues and the opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences.

McKinsey and Company (2010:20) suggest that *all* leaders should be given greater freedoms in determining their own learning pathways.

Research on adult learning demonstrates that adults learn best when development is delivered in context and when candidates are involved in shaping their own agenda.

The headteachers are in agreement and the apparent lack of appropriate formal leadership development programmes is something all of them mention. Most felt that the formal training prior to their appointment as headteacher and during their tenure was inappropriate and too generic to be applicable to their needs. This strongly echoes Duignan's (2004) view that the leader's specific needs should be taken into account for the training to be appropriate and acceptable to the leaders. As bespoke courses are not something the leaders routinely experience, the lack of confidence in this area must be symptomatic of this. Indeed, the nearest the leaders get to a consensus on leadership development in this area is to agree that they need a range of leadership development opportunities to help them grow as leaders. However, it is clear that learning left totally to informal methods is not sufficient. More formalised 'on the job' learning seems to be the preferred method of those in this and other studies and there needs to be a more conscious effort to plan and prepare these opportunities for headteachers in all stages of their leadership career. In this way the learning is brought about through actual experiences and critical reflection on those experiences. The headteachers' responses suggest that leadership learning is derived through complex relationships that are often unpredictable and sometimes challenging. This is also reflected in the words of West-Burnham (2005:54), who says: 'if the nature of leadership is complex, problematic and elusive then the nature of learning is even more so.'

Summary

The findings show that the headteachers in this study learn from their challenging experiences but are often unaware as to how they learn. Nor do they consciously use a model or framework to direct their learning. This finding is unexpected for two reasons. First, adult education literature is replete with examples of adults who learn consciously (Schön, 1983;

Kolb, 1984; Day, 2003; Day et al., 2008, 2010) and learning as a conscious action looms large in the field of adult learning. Consequently, the belief that learning for adults involves conscious action (Kolb, 1984; Bryman, 1992) led to the expectation by the researcher that the headteachers in this study would learn consciously, too. Second, we rely heavily on our leaders and we depend on headteachers to lead our schools. We study what they do and how they do it, so that we can understand what led to their success and transfer what they have learnt to others. This begs the question: how can headteachers be responsible for the learning of others when they do not understand how they learn themselves nor do they make time to consciously reflect on their learning from challenging experiences? This is important as much of our educational research states that learning organisations have to be led by leaders who are learners, who are reflective and who can identify learning opportunities from dealing with challenge and conflict.

There is a wealth of literature which describes how headteachers pass through particular developmental phases of headship (Day and Bakioglu, 1996; Ribbins, 2003; Gronn, 2003), suggesting that as 'lead learners' in the school community headteachers should engage in reflective practices and review their own qualities and skills if they are expecting others to do the same. Whilst some significance is given to the value of reflection and reflective practices in leadership training and development programmes, there remains a lack of clarity about which strategies and processes might be appropriate to support headteachers in reflecting on their learning in situ and which will contribute most to improve practice.

Conclusion

The literature and findings reveal that there are still aspects of leadership learning that are not fully understood and this study is evidence that we need to know more about how leaders learn from dealing with challenging situations. In an age when there is constant pressure on headteachers, learning becomes increasingly important as a fundamental skill for school success and survival. The more that leaders understand about their own learning in relation to the challenges they face, the more able they will be to foster learning throughout the organisation and this study is evidence that headteachers need to be supported to make sense of, and learn from, challenges in their own context. The more educators understand about the learning of headteachers when they undertake challenges, the better they can prepare and support them for those tasks. The findings from this chapter allow tentative conclusions to be drawn regarding the kind of support and leadership development that is needed for primary school headteachers. These are now presented in Chapter Six.

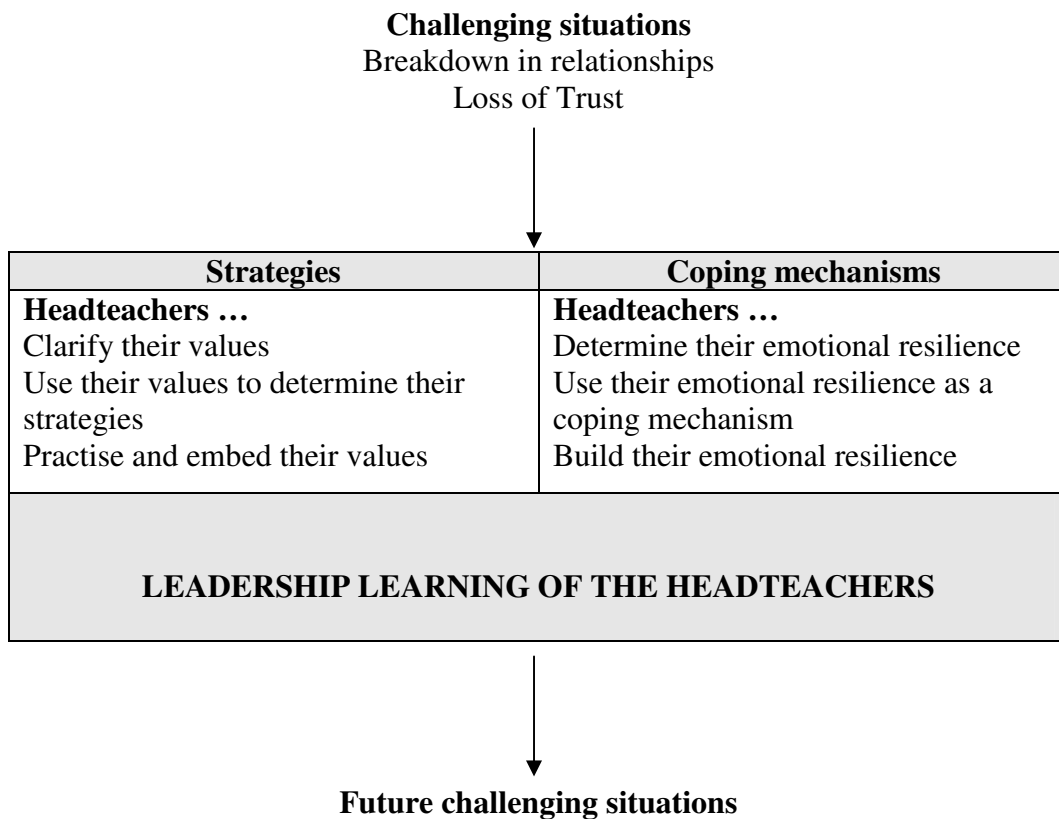
CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The overriding theme of this study has been the leadership learning of headteachers through challenging situations. This thesis argues that headteachers use similar strategies and coping mechanisms when dealing with challenging situations and that they learn to lead through the challenging situations they experience.

I have provided a simple representation of the findings of this study in Figure 6.1 which shows the influence of challenging situations on the leadership learning of the headteachers.

Figure 6.1: Leadership learning through challenging situations.



Challenging situations are shown in Figure 6.1 as a breakdown of relationships and loss of trust. The findings show that the strategies used by the headteachers to deal with challenging situations are heavily determined by their values. In dealing with the challenges the headteachers clarify and practise their values and thus embed them. The headteachers also determine the extent of their emotional resilience when dealing with challenging situations and use their emotional resilience as a coping mechanism. Evidence from the findings shows that the emotional resilience of headteachers is strengthened through dealing with the challenging situation. All of this contributes to the leadership learning of the headteachers and can be used to support them in dealing with further challenges. Whilst Figure 6.1 is a rather simplistic model, it is a useful starting point for this chapter in exemplifying the powerful correlation between challenging situations and leadership learning.

This final chapter returns to an examination of the four research questions set out in Chapter One. In the first section of this chapter there is a brief review of the findings to contextualise new theories that will be presented from the research. These findings are then synthesised into broad conclusions emanating from the research and recommendations are provided. Contributions to further research are then presented. Additionally the limitations of the research and the possibilities for future research are considered before ending with a concluding summary.

To recall, the research questions that have guided this study are:

1. What are the challenging situations faced by headteachers?
2. What determines the strategies headteachers use to deal with challenging situations?
3. Which coping mechanisms do headteachers exhibit when dealing with challenging situations?

4. What are the effects of challenging situations on the leadership learning of headteachers?

As in previous chapters question one is addressed under the subheading ‘Challenging situations’; question two under ‘Strategies for dealing with challenging situations’; question three under ‘Coping mechanisms for dealing with challenging situations’; and finally research question four is addressed under ‘Leadership learning’.

Review of the findings

Literature about leadership is extensive and continues to grow, develop and broaden (Bryman, 1992; Kouzes and Posner, 1995; Bennis, 2003; Leithwood and Riehl, 2005; Covey, 2006). The literature about educational leaders is similarly expansive. However, what this study reveals is that the literature on how educational leaders deal with, and learn from, challenging situations leaves important questions unanswered.

A number of researchers within education (West-Burnham, 2002; Bottery, 2004; Leithwood et al., 2006, Harris, 2008) discuss how effective leadership involves developing and sustaining relationships with those associated with the school. The importance of headteachers being people-centred and having strong interpersonal skills is evident in both the literature and this study and the challenges described by the headteachers are described as situations that involve a breakdown of relationships. The styles of leadership adopted by the headteachers in this study are aligned primarily with the descriptions of transformational and interpersonal leadership with their focus on ‘connections’ being formed between ‘leaders and followers’. The leaders in this study also exercise contingent leadership in responding to the

problems they encounter and the contexts in which they work (Leithwood et al., 1999; Yukl, 1999; Bottery, 2004).

Challenging situations

Within this study there is a very divergent range of experience amongst the eighteen respondents. Surprisingly there is no implication in this study that those in early headship, who have less experience and lack exposure to a range of people and personnel issues, face more ‘people’ challenges in the first years of headship than their more experienced counterparts. Glatter (2004:215) describes leadership as ‘embedded in relationships’ in conditions of ‘complexity and ambiguity’. This is strongly reflected in the pattern of challenging situations described by the headteachers. This study supports other research (Fullan, 2002; Eraut et al., 2002, Glatter, 2004; Crawford, 2009) in agreeing that developing relationships with other people is central to success in a leadership role. The study of tensions and relationship breakdowns between people in the organisation, in the context of challenging situations, provides a useful tool in identifying when, where and how leaders have learnt to lead and gives some answers as to why leaders lead in the way they do. This study explores the challenge and complexity of developing and sustaining relationships within schools. Crucially what this study also identifies is that length of tenure and experience, particularly in relation to building positive relationships, is not always a determinant of success. Experience alone is not sufficient. I would argue that the ability of headteachers to interact with, engage and understand others (i.e. their interpersonal ability) is more important. I would also argue that headteachers who possess strong interpersonal skills are our most effective leaders. An important question which, as yet, has not been answered by the academics, and which is

outside the remit of this study, is whether or not interpersonal skills can be learnt and developed in leaders.

Strategies for dealing with challenging situations

The strategies described by the leaders in this study are mirrored much of the recent literature on leadership (Brighouse, 2002; Day, 2003, Begley and Stefkovich, 2004; Duignan, 2006; Day et al., 2010). The powerful influence of values in determining how the headteachers deal with challenging situations is a recurring theme throughout this thesis. It could be argued that as the leaders in this study are all headteachers their values would obviously be similar in focusing on ensuring the best possible outcomes for the pupils. Whilst this may be true, I would argue that the overwhelming use of values to determine strategies by each of the eighteen headteachers in this study serves to highlight the degree of influence values have on the way in which leaders lead. The theme of values is strongly represented in *The National Standards for Headteachers* and in the training and development modules for NPQH. However, here lies a contradiction. Whilst in general NPQH is described by the headteachers in this study as having a positive effect in terms of affording them networking opportunities, it is seen as having a marginal effect on the development of their values and vision. Presumably this is one of the key reasons given for leaders to undertake such formal training and development, that it is not simply about improving technical competencies but should focus on establishing and embedding values. Fullan (2002) and Vaill (1996) state that whilst there is a place for formal leadership development, learning is best in context and is based on what a leader experiences. The headteachers in this study broadly agree with this line of thinking.

Coping mechanisms for dealing with challenging situations

The impact of the leaders' emotions on their ability to deal with challenging situations is a central theme of this study. Perhaps this is not surprising as 'people and relationships, and the social interactions this invokes, are woven into the fabric of the everyday life of a headteacher in primary schools' (Crawford 2007:87). The vocabulary used by the headteachers in this study when describing their challenging situation provides evidence of the intense emotionality of the experience. Headteachers describe behaviours that reflect emotional resilience, enabling them to deal with challenging situations and resulting in them being able to lead despite challenges and obstacles. Whilst there is evidence of impressive research in this area, particularly in recent years (Goleman, 2005; Bottery, 2007; Beatty, 2008; Crawford, 2007, 2009), further studies into emotional resilience in educational leadership will enable leaders to examine the way they handle their own emotions, particularly during complex or challenging situations, and how developing their emotional resilience can help them to deal with further challenges.

In considering the strategies and coping mechanisms used by the headteachers when dealing with challenging situations there is a surprising absence of one leadership strategy that merits discussion at this juncture, that of shared leadership. The findings show that the headteachers in this study do not generally consult or work with stakeholders within their organisations when dealing with challenging situations. They describe how they take sole responsibility for dealing with the challenge and for deciding which strategies to use when managing the situation. This is at odds with many of the studies on shared leadership, which suggest that the 'burden' of leadership should not rest on one set of shoulders and that the key to school effectiveness is through sharing leadership (Muijs et al., 2006; Leithwood et al., 2006; Harris,

2008). The majority of headteachers in this study choose not to consult with internal stakeholders when faced with challenging situations. Some headteachers said that they appreciated the support and advice of external colleagues, but the majority acted alone when dealing with the challenging situations. In my opinion this has significant implications for the way in which leaders are prepared for headship as they move from partial responsibility as deputy headteachers to full responsibility as headteachers.

Leadership learning

Leadership learning has become an increasingly large and complex phenomenon. The subject matter is broad and varied, the audiences are greater in number and role, and the methods of delivery and development are diverse (Kolb, 1984; Bryman, 1992; Duignan, 2004). This study supports the argument that learning occurs when events conspire to create obstacles that leaders have to overcome (Mumford, 1994; Glatter, 2009; Eraut, 2010). The headteachers all acknowledge that they learnt about themselves and about their leadership through dealing with the challenging situation. The learning the leaders gained was sometimes described as confirmatory and sometimes revelatory. Learning is gained from the experience of dealing with a challenging situation and in some instances the learning enables the headteachers to 'do things better next time'. The findings clearly show that the learning of the leaders in this study is mostly accidental and incidental and that the leaders' understanding of their learning is often developed after the challenging situation, primarily because someone helped with this development. The data generated by the interviews did not provide indications that the leaders reflected on their learning by themselves. Whilst educators extol the value of providing assistance to adult learners (Eraut, 1995, 2010; Day, 2003), it is not entirely clear in this study as to whether or not the leaders would have generated a greater understanding of their

learning without the assistance of the researcher. I would argue that if leaders are to get to the root of how they learn to lead, it is necessary for them to reflect, unpick and articulate how they have learnt to lead. If this is not done, much of what they have learnt will remain implicit and tacit, which could prove problematic when new challenges arise.

In order to summarise and respond to the diverse dimensions and themes which have emerged from exploring leadership learning through challenging situations, I have devised a leadership development model which proposes key components for effective leadership learning. Table 6.1, reflects the findings from the interviews in the study and information gained from reviewing previous research in this area, particularly that of McKinsey and Company (2010) and West-Burnham (2010).

Table 6.1: The components of effective leadership development strategies

Headteachers learn best from challenging situations ...	Learning from challenge should be this ...	Learning from challenge should <i>not</i> be this ...
When they are on the edge of their comfort zone.	Problem-solving, challenge-based approaches.	Stand-alone training without direct relevance to current challenges. Do what you know ... just better.
Through action and experience.	Genuine issues in real time. Opportunities for safe mistake-making. Exercise emotional resilience. Connect learning to previous experience.	Everything you need to know is in the big book we handed out on the training day.
When their experience and learning style is accounted for.	Building on existing knowledge and experience.	All learning is similar so generic training is ok.
Through supported and unsupported reflection.	Review, reflection and thinking through implications. Framework for 'just in time' reflection. Coaching. Peer support and interaction.	Accidental. Inconsistent. Isolating. Declaring success and never failure.
When supported by effective processes and systems.	Availability of best practice, case studies etc.	Training without learning.

Table 6.1, builds on the perceived effectiveness of more experiential forms of headteacher learning based on experiences and context rather than generic training solutions. The strategies for leadership development in the table are flexible as no single method is suggested to support leaders in dealing with challenging situations. The proposal here is to develop bespoke programmes for individual leaders in their own context. Whilst Table 6.1, is not intended as a panacea for all development, it is useful in focusing headteachers and those responsible for leadership development on more experiential forms of professional development. It acknowledges that leadership involves the complex interaction between personal and professional learning experiences and highlights the place of reflection in enabling and enhancing understanding and thus informing the actions and strategies of the headteachers. In this way, the learning is brought under critical control and can be used as a basis for improving individual confidence and competence, especially in dealing with challenging situations. The potential of developing the informal processes of learning in a more structured way is clearly indicated in the table above. The challenge of applying this bespoke model of learning is that it does not unfold in a smooth, orderly way like traditional leadership development programmes, but demands different amounts of time, effort and commitment from the headteachers.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings from this study form the basis upon which the following conclusions are drawn and recommendations made. First, a brief review of the purpose of the study is in order. This study was interpretive. Its purpose was to understand more completely the challenging situations experienced by primary school headteachers and to interpret how they influence their leadership learning. The interpretive view of this research allows the reality of each

leader to be explored and that how they have learnt to lead has been influenced by individual experience and insight. The following conclusions and recommendations must be understood and evaluated in light of this purpose for the study.

Conclusion one: *The most challenging situations faced by headteachers are those that involve relationships with adults in the organisation.*

The leaders in this study confirm that leading a school is a social process involving complex and sometimes challenging interactions with those involved in their organisations. Managing people and building relationships is cited by the headteachers as crucial to the success of their schools. It is therefore imperative that those responsible for leadership succession and headteacher recruitment ensure that aspiring headteachers possess the interpersonal skills necessary to build and sustain relationships in schools. Additionally leadership development must reflect the importance of relationship-building whilst acknowledging the challenges and complexity this involves.

Conclusion two: *Challenges are a stimulus for learning.*

The leaders in this study learn from the challenging situations they face. Educators need to understand more about how leaders learn from dealing with challenging situations and use this knowledge to enhance the ability of the leaders to solve problems in a planned way. There are questions throughout this study about the effectiveness and appropriateness of pre-headship programmes. Programme designers need to ensure that formal programmes for

headship preparation, such as the NPQH, reflect the complexities of the headship role and encompass the principles of effective adult learning.

Conclusion three: Leaders learn to lead through their experiences.

The headteachers describe their most powerful learning as that which is gained through practical school experiences rather than through formal training programmes. Those who support and develop headteachers need to ensure that experiential learning and exposure to ‘real-life’ challenges and scenarios are significant features of leadership development. Bespoke learning programmes for leaders need to be designed to combine ‘on the job’ learning with individual leadership competencies giving due consideration to the learning preferences of the leaders. Among the advantages of using of real-life situations is that it provides the learners with a common experiential foundation upon which learning can be built. Whether or not we can replicate real-life challenges faced by headteachers on a daily basis and use them as a basis for leadership development remains, in my opinion, questionable.

Conclusion four: Leaders do not use a planned process or conscious reflection to direct their learning.

This study did not provide evidence that leaders learn from challenging situations in a structured way, nor do they consciously use reflection to support their learning. An outcome of the study could be to provide a framework that supports headteachers to critically reflect on their learning *during* the challenging situations as well as *after* so that they can deal with the

situation, learn from it much more quickly and use their learning to determine consequent and future actions. In this case, being forewarned is being forearmed. Headteachers also need to have appropriate access to adult intervention through coaching and networks to provide structured support for their reflection and learning.

Conclusion five: *Values determine the strategies headteachers use when dealing with challenging situations.*

The headteachers in this study rely on values to help them identify actions to deal with challenging situations. It is therefore important that educators continue to explore the powerful influence of values in the leadership strategies used by headteachers. Additionally leadership development programmes need to reflect the crucial interplay between the values, behaviours and actions of leaders.

Conclusion six: *The leaders' emotional resilience determines their ability to deal with challenging situations.*

Educators acknowledge that leading a school is highly complex and often challenging. This study shows that emotional resilience enables the headteachers to develop and sustain their leadership despite the challenges and obstacles they face. The research on emotional intelligence is well established in educational literature. This now needs to be broadened to encompass the significant influence of emotional resilience in sustaining and supporting leaders.

Conclusion seven: Building and sustaining trust are core components in school leadership.

This study shows that leaders recognise the value of trust in their schools. Recent educational research identifies trust as a significant factor in school effectiveness and this now needs to be evidenced in current leadership and development programmes for aspiring and serving leaders. More studies should be conducted with a focus on relationship and trust building as a mechanism for transforming schools. It is also extremely important for studies to provide strategies or mechanisms to support leaders when trust has been broken or when there is mistrust. This needs to be acknowledged by those who are responsible for supporting and developing leaders at all levels.

The contribution to research

This was a small sample, consisting of eighteen primary school headteachers from a single local authority, so it would be inappropriate to generalise or extrapolate from its findings. However, it does provide a basis upon which a fuller picture of how leaders learn to lead can be drawn and serves to provide key insights to inform the educational research agenda, particularly in relation to the influence of challenging situations on leadership learning. This study also seeks to contribute to an understanding of the role and experiences of primary school headteachers and further informs the research agenda and the literature regarding leadership in primary schools.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

This research employs semi-structured interviews with eighteen headteachers located in one local authority. Although this is an accepted outcome of this type of research, it does place

limitations on the extent to which the knowledge gained in this research is transferable to other localities outside this geographical region. A more comprehensive study would be to draw upon leaders in a more diverse geographical region such as central England or the north of England where leaders' experiences may be very different. This study concentrated on the learning of primary school headteachers. Follow-up studies with secondary school headteachers will enable researchers to expand and deepen the findings of this study.

One of the conclusions of this study is that the intervention of the researcher enhanced the ability of the headteachers to become more aware of, and knowledgeable about, their learning. The need to assist leaders' learning has been argued above. This suggestion provides the opportunity to explore additional methods to assist meaningful headteacher learning. In a similar vein, one of the tentative conclusions drawn from this study is the inappropriate nature of some formal professional development. Challenging situations are treated as well defined and readily soluble, and therefore susceptible to formal standardised types of training. However, this can only be considered from the data emanating from this study. It would be interesting to explore how recently developed professional development programmes are intending to develop leaders' capacity to lead and to what extent the participants of the programme are both engaged in the process and are allowed to draw upon real-life challenging experiences. Headteachers should be prepared and supported to successfully lead schools that reflect the complexities and uncertainties of the modern world.

Whilst it is clear that the challenging situations described in this study are those that are experienced by headteachers, the way in which leaders learn from challenges could, perhaps, also relate to other professionals working in various public services with similar complex and

challenging situations. With further investigation, therefore, there is the possibility of this small-scale study being of benefit to a far broader spectrum of workers.

An executive summary of the research findings was disseminated to eight of the headteachers who participated in this research. This dissemination took place six months prior to completing the thesis and offered opportunities for critical comment and debate regarding the results and verification of the conclusions (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Summary

What emerges from this small-scale study of eighteen primary school headteachers is the powerful influence of challenging situations on leadership learning. However, what this study also highlights is a dearth in the literature relating to the influence of challenging situations on the leadership learning experiences of headteachers, which is reflected in the headteachers' lack of awareness in their own learning. The challenge is therefore to support headteachers in translating experiential processes of learning throughout their career into meaningful development initiatives. This can be done through formal coaching systems, encouraging the formation of meaningful networks and providing guided critical reflection on experiences.

The findings of this study provide evidence that trust and emotional resilience should be considered as a vital part of leadership development and their constructs used in school improvement efforts. More studies should be conducted on trust-building as a mechanism for transforming schools and building emotional resilience to sustain leaders in difficult times. It is also extremely important for educational studies to continue to explore the intensely emotional work of headteachers and provide support and guidance that will help them to deal

with emotionally charged situations. Further studies are needed on the restoration of trust in school contexts.

There is also the need to recognise and respond to the specific, contextual needs of the headteachers at challenging points in their headship. A gap has been identified in this research of meaningful professional development. There is a certainly a place for formal programmes to teach those aspects of leadership that can be taught and learnt, but, in the main, leadership programme designers should aim to enhance those aspects of leadership which have been acquired through real-life problems and scenarios. This needs to reflect the demands of primary school education in the twenty-first century and is a crucial requirement if headteachers are to effectively carry out what is an extremely complex and challenging role.

Final reflection

As a final statement in this thesis, I propose to comment on my own position as the researcher and to explore some of my own learning as a result of this study.

At the time of this research, I had been in the education profession for over twenty-five years. Therefore, I held a strong belief in the value of education and in working with leaders to drive forward school improvement. At the start of this study I was a headteacher of one of the primary schools in a large local authority. In the second year of the study I was appointed as a Senior Education Adviser in the London borough chosen for this research. Although there were many benefits to this in terms of accessibility and insider knowledge, I am aware that participants may have readily agreed their involvement due to my position within the authority and that their perceptions of my role may also have affected some of the responses

from headteachers interviewed. The best I can do is to state these as facts so that the reader can make his or her own judgements on the findings.

Prior to beginning this study, I had done very little formal academic research. I had, however, been involved in leadership development as a consultant for the local authority and was for some years a facilitator for the NCSL. Having facilitated leadership development programmes in the local authority, the headteachers in this study all knew of my leadership work and believed in my experience as a leadership development adviser. As participants in the research they knew that my study was academic and that my role as researcher was not to give them advice. Nonetheless, some of them wanted to learn from our interactions and to use the opportunity to reflect on their leadership impact in their schools. A few wanted to discuss whether or not the strategies they had used to deal with their challenging situations had been appropriate. Others wanted to talk to me about the difficulties they currently faced in their organisations. My aim was to focus on the leaders' learning. A delicate balancing act ensued.

Perhaps naively I had also not anticipated the level of emotion that would be exhibited by the headteachers when describing their challenging situations. Again, this required sensitive and delicate handling. I learnt a valuable lesson. Qualitative studies have intended and unintended effects. Planning for the expected effects is one thing; being able to respond to the unexpected effects is a different thing altogether. In my opinion, responding to the unexpected effects may be the greater challenge for qualitative researchers. By their nature, qualitative studies cannot, and probably should not, be controlled and I have learnt that qualitative researchers must rely on flexibility and creativity to respond to the unpredicted and unpredictable.

When I began my doctoral studies I was clear about selecting a dissertation topic. Leadership, as a topic of interest, has been an integral part of my professional life for the past twenty years and I have been fortunate to be presented with numerous opportunities to look at and study leadership as well as supporting and developing the leadership of others. The conclusions and recommendations in this thesis are offered in the spirit of the research; that is to be of help and benefit to school leaders and to those involved in school leadership research. The increasing intensification and challenge of the headteacher's role has already been established in this study. Despite the issues and complexities that headteachers face they are still charged with leading their school successfully for the benefit of pupils, staff and stakeholders. Dealing with challenging situations, and learning from them, has never been more important.

Letter to Interviewees

Dear

Many thanks for agreeing to be part of my study for a Doctorate in Education with Birmingham University. The working title of my thesis is: '*Leadership Learning Through Challenging Situations: Primary School Headteachers*'. The outcome of this research is to contribute to a better understanding of leadership development in Primary Education and beyond. I have sought and gained the consent of the LA's Assistant Director for this research. The purpose of this letter is to outline in more detail the purpose of the study and the interview process.

The research involves me coming to your school and interviewing you for about forty minutes with questions based on the following broad themes:

1. What have been the most **challenging situations** that you have had to face as a headteacher? (*Limit these to 3*)
2. Which strategies did you use during the challenging situations and how did you cope with the challenges?
3. What did you learn from the challenging situations?
4. How do you think your training and development as a headteacher helped you to deal with these challenging situations?

The tapes of the interviews will be transcribed and analysed, along with responses from a number of other headteachers. The data gathered and subsequent findings will be presented in my thesis. Transcriptions of your taped interviews will be available to you prior to the final analysis of the data, to offer you the opportunity to comment and amend if you so wish.

You will not be named at any time in this study and the headteachers will only be described as working in one of the London authorities. An executive summary of my findings may be requested and will be sent to you at the end of the research. You may also have access to my thesis before submission if required, although the final responsibility for the content of the thesis and the interpretation of the data therein will be mine.

All recordings of interviews will be kept securely and will not be made available to anyone other than my research supervisors and examiners. Your name will not be stored by any electronic means as part of this project. You have the right to withdraw your consent at any time during this study. If this happens, your data will not be used in the analysis of the findings.

Thank you again for agreeing to be part of this research. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any queries.

Kind regards,

Pauline Sammon
Senior Adviser

.....

Permission Slip (please fill this in and return before the start of the interview)

Name:

School:

Please delete where appropriate:

- I agree to being interviewed for this research **Yes/No**
- I request copies of the transcripts of my interviews in order to comment and amend. **Yes/No**
- I request an executive summary of the findings (approximately 1,500 words). **Yes/No**
- I request a copy of the final thesis (50,000 words). **Yes/No**
- I am aware that I can withdraw at any time. **Yes/ No**

Signed:

Interview Questions

Pre interview

1. *Collect data about career journey*
2. *Clarify the term 'leadership learning'*
3. *Mutually decide on the challenging situation(s) to be discussed in this interview.*
4. *Outline the interview process*

1. Talk about the challenging situation(s) that you have had to face as a headteacher.
2. Why did you choose this one?
3. How did you deal with this situation? (*Probe* What strategies were used?)
4. What supported/guided you during this time?
5. What did you learn from dealing with the challenging situation?
6. What did you learn about yourself and your school during this time?
7. How do you think this learning has helped you deal with other similar situations?
8. How do you think your leadership preparation and development helped you deal with this challenging situation?

Interview Sample

Early headship (0–3 years); middle headship (3–10 years) and late headship (10+ years)

Headteacher respondents	Length of tenure
Headteacher 1	Late Headship
Headteacher 2	Late Headship
Headteacher 3	Late Headship
Headteacher 4	Early Headship
Headteacher 5	Early Headship
Headteacher 6	Late Headship
Headteacher 7	Late Headship
Headteacher 8	Middle Headship
Headteacher 9	Middle Headship
Headteacher 10	Late Headship
Headteacher 11	Middle Headship
Headteacher 12	Early Headship
Headteacher 13	Middle Headship
Headteacher 14	Early Headship
Headteacher 15	Early Headship
Headteacher 16	Middle Headship
Headteacher 17	Middle Headship
Headteacher 18	Early Headship

Themes from the Analysis of Interview Transcripts

Headteacher respondents	Learning to lead	Relationships	Trust	Values	Emotional Resilience
Headteacher 1	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Headteacher 2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Headteacher 3	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Headteacher 4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Headteacher 5	✓	✓		✓	✓
Headteacher 6	✓	✓	✓		✓
Headteacher 7	✓	✓			✓
Headteacher 8	✓	✓			✓
Headteacher 9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Headteacher 10	✓	✓			✓
Headteacher 11	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Headteacher 12	✓	✓	✓		
Headteacher 13	✓	✓	✓		✓
Headteacher 14	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Headteacher 15	✓	✓		✓	✓
Headteacher 16	✓	✓		✓	
Headteacher 17	✓	✓		✓	✓
Headteacher 18	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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